

Chicago, the Pulse of AnUPSIDeErɪDOWNea-by ChangeTheCircumstances

Category: Stranger Things (TV 2016)

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Characters: Axel (Stranger Things), Billy Hargrove, Dottie (Stranger Things), Dustin Henderson, Eleven (Stranger Things), Funshine (Stranger Things), Jim "Chief" Hopper, Jonathan Byers, Joyce Byers, Kali Prasad, Lucas Sinclair, Maxine "Max" Mayfield, Mick (Stranger Things), Mike Wheeler, Nancy Wheeler, Sam Owens (Stranger Things), Steve Harrington, Will Byers, others - Character

Relationships: Billy Hargrove & Kali Prasad, Billy Hargrove & Maxine "Max" Mayfield, Billy Hargrove & Steve Harrington, Eleven & Kali Prasad, Jonathan Byers/Nancy Wheeler, Will Byers & Eleven & Dustin Henderson & Maxine "Max" Mayfield & Lucas Sinclair & Mike Wheeler

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Summary:

On the day of Billy's graduation, he ran. He decided to leave his fucked up life behind and start anew. Max didn't care. It was the last she would see of him, right? The idea already brightened her day and the thought of each other left the step-siblings' minds.

The months past, good and bad occurred, miracles and shattered dreams fell, but nothing was more shocking than when the search for El's sister led Max straight back to Billy.

1. Prologue: From May 1984 to November 1985

Author's Note:

I just cannot stay away from this fandom right now! So here's an idea I actually planned like immediately after watching season 2. It's been on the back-burner for a while and I'm excited to finally be writing about it. I'm going to straight up say the updates are going to be spotty because of school and the fact that I'm planning the chapters to be pretty long. I have the story planned out though, so I'm almost positive it'll be eight chapters.

For those that have read my other stories, this probably won't have Billy/Steve just because I haven't thought of a way to put it in the story that makes sense. Warning!!! though for those that don't like Billy/Steve just in case that changes, but either way, there will definitely be plenty of Billy&Steve because I love brainstorming their interactions no matter the context.

Also, the title is kind of a paraphrase of a quote by Sarah Bernhardt "I adore Chicago. It is the pulse of America". I might actually change the title because I wasn't sure what to call it but this is it for now.

Anyways, here's the prologue. I hope you enjoy and thank you for reading!

Technically, Max had wanted to go to graduation for Steve and Jonathan. All her friends were going with the Byers to support them. Max would have loved to go with them, to cheer them both on and then go to dinner afterwards. They all would have crowded into one of the big booths at the local diner ahead of all the other families, ate until their stomachs couldn't take anymore, and then head to the cabin to see Jane. She'd officially be introduced to the town that summer and get to go to school afterwards, but for now she was still a secret.

Max would have loved that, but instead she had to go with her mom and Neil for Billy. It was honestly the last thing she wanted to do. Already the day had started out utterly perfect. Billy had been late to the rehearsal that morning leading to another yelling match between him and his father. Then her mother tried to do up her hair even though Max liked it just how it was, and of course the whole ride over Neil just talked about Billy like he was one of the stupidest kids on the planet. Not that Max cared about Billy, but just listening to his dad go on and on like that was grating to her ears and nerves. Christ, he was insufferable! She still didn't understand how her mom could have married that asshole.

Despite the start to the day, the actual graduation ceremony went fine enough. Max managed to wave a few times at her friends when Neil and her mother weren't looking and she still got to see Steve and Jonathan graduate. Billy didn't do anything to screw up the ceremony and besides one dumb teen trying and failing to do a back flip, the whole thing was pretty normal.

But afterwards while all other families hugged and congratulated their newly freed teen, Max had to deal with the yelling that started up between Billy and Neil.

"Do you really think you can get anywhere in life without me!? You've never done anything on your own! I'm still thinking that you passing high school was a mistake!"

It went on like that for about a minute, Max mostly ignoring the words and silently begging to get home.

And then Billy hit his dad.

Max stared at him, wide eyed. She couldn't remember that ever happening. Sure, maybe Neil knocked him around once in a while but it had never been the other way around. She watched as Neil reeled from the slap. Compared to what Billy was capable of, it was a fairly tame strike and Billy immediately looked terrified after doing it.

Neil hit him back twice as hard, his fist actually closed. Max could hear the sound of Billy's nose breaking, blood welling up and

dripping into his lips.

“Fuck you!!!” Billy screamed. He turned his back and disappeared into the crowd.

Max couldn’t remember when his birthday was. In a week? Two days? The point was that he’d be eighteen soon and then his dad wouldn’t have any hold on him anyways. Max doubted Neil would go to any kind of trouble tracking him down for something like three more days of custody.

She let out a tired sigh. Maybe in the ensuing chaos she could get away and meet up with her friends. Either way, at least she wouldn’t have to worry about Billy again.

Billy got in his car, wiping at his nose as he sped towards the house. He drove two people off the road but seeing as there wasn’t a cop car in sight, he didn’t care. Once there, he hit the curb and carelessly parked on the sidewalk. His hands shook as he forced his key into the front door and ran to his bedroom.

He hadn’t exactly planned for today to be it but he’d at least been saving up for his escape. It wasn’t much since his dad had confiscated all his hard work last year but it was better than nothing. Tossing the stupid graduation gown off, he shoved the money and some spare clothes into a bag. As a last thought, he took off the house key and dropped it on the ground before booking it back to the car. Thankfully his dad hadn’t come back and Billy quickly floored it down the road.

Just four more days and he’d be legal. Then he wouldn’t have to look over his shoulder ever again.

He left the town behind, the school, the kids, Harrington, his father, Susan, whatever weird shit was going on in that fucked up place, he left it all behind him. He just kept his foot pressed to the gas pedal, eyes not veering from the road until a small light popped up on his dash.

Shit, already low on gas? He should have filled up yesterday.

Granted, he couldn't have known his getaway would be today. A green sign flew by him and he saw the word, Chicago. There would be plenty of gas stations there and he wouldn't have to risk his luck by going through these small towns. It would be the first time in months that he'd be back in a real city too.

It wasn't LA but he'd have to stop somewhere if he ever wanted to get back to Cali and he'd rather deal with city people than hill folk.

At the next exit with a sign pointing to Chicago, he turned and eventually found the interstate. It was so damn refreshing, seeing the tall buildings appear in the distance. Finally, something besides trees and gravel roads.

Once picking a random exit, he found a gas station about three minutes later. He walked in and handed over twenty dollars in cash. It should be enough to fill his tanks.

As the man rang him up, Billy realized the guy's weird stares were probably due to the dried blood still smeared across his face, hands, and aching nose.

"You alright kid?" he asked as he passed a receipt over.

Billy's eyes looked at the wall of cigarettes behind the guy. He was low if he remembered correctly. He passed over what pocket change he had. "A pack of Marlboros." A grin finally appeared on Billy's face. He was free. "I'm just peachy old man," he laughed, taking the cigarettes and quickly heading back to his car.

"So, Billy's just gone?"

"Yep."

That was the extent of Max's conversation with her friends on the subject. Three weeks after graduation and Max's first summer with her newfound friends was in full swing. Though the group wasn't huge into sports, Max convinced them to go swimming with her, and Steve was nice enough to let them use his pool so they wouldn't have to deal with other people.

“Damn Max! You’re really fast!” yelled Dustin as she beat Lucas and Will in another race across the pool. “Were you on some kind of team?”

Max pushed a few loose strands out of her face and shook her head. “Naw, the pool or the ocean was just a nice place to hang. You know? What I’d really like is if they had a skate park around here,” she sighed.

“Steve! You should take us!” Dustin quickly said.

Steve jolted from where he’d been lying down half asleep on a beach chair. He propped his sunglasses onto his head. “What the hell are you trying to con me in to?”

“Not con,” smirked Lucas as he floated over and pulled himself up on the side.

“We’re just suggesting,” Will innocently replied.

“We could go to a nearby town or city that has one,” Mike quickly said. “Maybe...maybe Jane could come too.”

“You guys realize I have a life, right?” asked Steve.

“What life? All you’ve been doing is driving us everywhere,” snorted Lucas.

Dustin splashed water at Steve. “Yeah, it’ll be fun. Come on Steve. Come ooooon.”

“You guys are impossible,” snorted Steve. He jumped into a less relaxed sitting position when the back door opened though, and everyone jolted too.

“Steve? Who are...your friends?” his mom slowly said, taking note of their ages.

“Uh, well I mean...you know—”

“He’s babysitting us,” Dustin grinned. “Best babysitter around!”

Steve face palmed though one glance at his mom showed that she'd bought it. Max supposed it was a better explanation than, he helped us deal with some demodogs and torch another dimension that was connected to a giant monster and when you go through something like that, no matter the age, it's kind of hard not to become friends. Yeah, babysitter definitely made more sense.

"Well," his mother murmured, "Just remember you won't be able to do things like this soon. You need to prepare to start working with your father."

"Yeah, I got it mom. No problem."

"Good, will I see you for dinner?"

"Probably."

"Alright Steve, well...you kids have fun," she said, finally going back inside.

Steve let out a tired groan and collapsed back against the beach chair.

"You mean you're still planning on working with your dad?" asked Dustin.

"Wasn't that just an excuse to stick around for Nancy?" muttered Mike.

"Urgh, I don't know anymore just...you know what? Yeah, tomorrow we'll take a trip somewhere," sighed Steve.

"Yay!" the kids cheered.

Max swam closer, resting her chin on the edge of the pool. "Isn't that just running away from your problems instead of fixing it?"

"I don't need a lesson from a kid four years younger than me," sighed Steve. "I'll figure things out one way or another. Let's just find out the best skate park in the area, alright?"

The kids cheered again before focusing back on splashing water at

each other and racing across the pool.

Billy had wanted to go to Cali because it had been his home. But what was really left there for him? His mom had left early on, his old house was long gone, and the people he'd known could have barely been called friends.

Ending up stuck in Chicago had made him rethink his plans about where he wanted to go. He'd grabbed a room in a seedy hotel and really looked at what he had. Technically, he could have gotten to Cali with what money was left, but then he would have been dead broke by the time he got there. What was the point of that? He might as well try something new.

For the past few weeks, he'd remained in Chicago. The place had plenty of opportunities, and it was easy getting a job in the back at some store. Most people tried to avoid the graveyard shift so Billy just took as many hours as he could get, often sleeping all day and getting up for work around six at night.

It wasn't perfect but he was at least getting money now.

The hotel had been eating a hole in his pocket so he rented a room from a house that was actually closer to his new job. He was pretty sure that the rent was so cheap because the other people who lived there did some sketchy things but Billy didn't really care. It meant a roof over his head and it was easier getting beer from them rather than risking it at some liquor store. He'd left his fake id behind and still didn't know the best place to get a new one, or a store that didn't care.

Oh well, if he stuck around long enough he'd figure it out.

So all in all, his life actually had some consistency for once. He didn't have to worry about looking over his shoulder, of keeping track of Max, or memorizing his father's schedule. Every now and then something would break in another room or it would sound like someone got thrown into a wall. That noise always woke Billy up, made him flinch and wonder-is he here? But it was just the other tenants arguing, usually about money, and seeing as Billy kept good

on his own payments, they never really bothered him.

Ironically, he was finally doing what his dad had always pressed on him, being responsible. He paid bills, shopped for groceries, was always on time for work. Technically, it was what his father had wanted, just minus the independence.

Either way, he no longer had to worry about what his father thought. He really was free.

Max managed to do that trick she'd been working on, jumping up and flipping the board under her feet. This time she had a solid landing and glided across the concrete to where everyone was cheering.

They'd found a pretty good skate park that was only thirty minutes away. This was their third time there but the first time Jane had gotten to join them. The Chief had scouted out the area before he'd agreed to it and they'd gone on a day where fewer people were going to be there. The Chief had taken Mike and Jane, allowing more room in Steve's car.

Lucas and Mike were trying out skates and for their third time, weren't too bad at it. Will and Dustin had stuck with messing around on their bikes and then there was Jane, for the moment just watching everyone.

Max had almost made her way over to the group when some guy cut her off.

He was one of the two older teens there and Max glared up at him for his rudeness.

"What? You think you're any good? Just because some kids cheered you-ahh!"

Max blinked. She'd been ready to shoot him a nasty word or kick him in the shin but then he'd just flown across the park, hitting a railing and flipping over before he fell flat on his face.

"Jane!" Hopper yelled.

She looked at him and shrugged, clearly not caring. Max knew about Jane's powers so the act wasn't too surprising except... "Hey!" Max cried out, quickly pushing against the ground and gliding up in front of Jane. "You...you did that to me! Didn't you? In the gym!"

"I..." Now Jane did look a little sheepish. Her curls fell in front of her face. "I'm...sorry. It was a wrong understanding."

"You mean misunderstanding?"

Jane hesitantly nodded.

"Well...crap like that happens," Max replied. From the few times they'd hung out, she'd kind of got the feeling that Jane thought she liked Mike or something, like like-liked him. Max was pretty sure she would have been indifferent to some weird jealousy like that if their places were switched, but it had happened a while ago. Now, Max just wanted to make sure Jane thought of her as part of the group to. Max extended an olive branch by allowing a smile on her face. "I'm just happy I finally know what made me go flying off my board. I was worried I did something stupid. And thanks about the guy, even if you didn't have to. That was pretty funny."

Jane blinked, clearly surprised by her response before she slowly gave a shy smile. "Thank you."

"Yeah, well thanks too," smiled Max. "Hey, want to try and ride my board? Have you ever done that before?"

She shook her head.

"Well here. I'll help you balance," grinned Max. She glanced over, watching the now humiliated guy scurry off with his friend. Max laughed again and then took Jane's hand, holding onto her tight as she instructed her how to get on the skateboard and where to plant her feet.

Max held on the entire time, keeping Jane from falling over and pulling her along at times so she could simply practice the balancing aspect.

"Go Jane!" yelled Mike.

“Great job!” Will called out.

The others yelled encouragement too, giving Jane more confidence as Max walked beside her around the park.

The bulb in Billy’s bedroom had stopped working so he made sure to grab a pack when he got his groceries. It was early in the morning, just after five. It was usually the only chance he had to go shopping since he usually went straight to work after waking up.

It went by quickly, hardly anyone in the store and the line empty for the cash register. However, as he walked out, he spotted the police and tow truck parked near his car.

“Hey! Hey what gives!” yelled Billy as he walked over.

“Are you Billy Hargrove?” asked an officer.

“What does it matter? Why are you towing my car! I’m allowed to park here!”

“It’s actually not.”

Billy bristled. “What the hell do you mean not? It’s an open parking lot for the store I just bought shit from—”

“I mean it’s not your car.”

“What do you mean?” Billy asked in confusion. “I’ve had this car for three years! It’s mine!”

“Actually, it’s in Neil Hargrove’s name.”

In an instant, Billy could feel his stomach drop.

“Don’t worry,” sighed the officer, “he doesn’t really care about pressing charges. He just wants the car back.”

Why take the car and not have him charged? Oh, of course. His father didn’t want to waste money or time. He didn’t want to be forced to sit in a courtroom and pay for a lawyer or probably give

Billy a chance to speak about some of the shit he had done. But by still taking the car away, his dad could fuck with Billy and still not waste any of his precious time or cash.

“Fuck!”

“Sir! I am going to have to—”

“Fuck you,” Billy growled as he dropped his bag. He could hear the bulbs cracking as he walked forward.

“I can still arrest you for—”

“I’m just getting my belongings! Is that allowed?” spit Billy.

The officer let out a tired sigh and then nodded.

Billy grabbed his jacket from the back, a pack of cigarettes, and a ring he’d thrown into the cup holder before work. He checked the trunk, but it was empty. He left all the trash behind, slammed the trunk shut, dropped the keys on the ground, and stalked off. He ignored the officer’s shouts and didn’t bother to pick up the food he’d just bought. He lit a cigarette and walked down the street. People crossed over as he drew near, practically feeling the anger rolling off of him despite the tears that welled up in his eyes.

That car had been the one thing Billy could always rely on. It had been his baby. It had been one of the few things his dad had let him pick out. He’d cleaned it, given it a new paint polish, fixed up the engine. He’d kept it in peak condition. It had been his one comfort, his ticket to freedom no matter where he was or what was happening.

It had been the one constant in the past few years that he could trust and now his father had stripped him of that too.

Billy didn’t get home until around noon. There wasn’t enough money in his wallet for a cab and everything was stranger on foot. It was easy to get turned around and he was too exhausted to be angry by the time he walked in and went to bed. He collapsed on the sheets and immediately fell asleep.

It was the first time he missed work since beginning the job.

“I’m so proud of you sweetheart,” murmured Joyce as she hugged her eldest tight.

Max found it hard not to smile too. School was fast approaching but she’d gotten permission from Neil and her mom to go with everyone to the nearest airport.

“You’re going to be so far away,” Will sighed, not for the first time.

“Doesn’t mean I can’t visit. And I’ll call and write as often as possible too,” Jonathan quickly said.

“If you take any pictures, you should send it our way,” Steve smiled.
“I always wanted to go to New York.”

“Then this will give everyone a good reason to take a trip sometime,” Nancy smiled. She then turned and lightly kissed Jonathan while Max and everyone else made faces and yucky kissing noises. “Call me when you get to your dorm.”

“Definitely,” Jonathan softly said.

He then bent down and gave Will a big enough hug to pull him off the ground. “Keep an eye on mom for me, will you?”

Joyce gave a light laugh as Will nodded. “Always.”

“I already feel better about going,” smiled Jonathan.

He did a half hug with Steve, ruffled Dustin’s hair, and then waved back at them as he headed towards his flight. Joyce let out a tired sigh, allowing some of the worry to come across her face once Jonathan wasn’t looking.

“Don’t worry mom,” Will smiled. “Weird crap only really happens here.”

They all chuckled at that, though the sound was still soft and somewhat sad. Joyce immediately brought up the mood though and

said, “How about we go to that arcade that you were so excited about. Hmm?”

The kids cheered and Steve and Nancy tagged along too. The arcade was far bigger than the one in Hawkins and Max quickly ran to her favorite game, determined to get the top five high scores on it before they left.

It felt weird, knowing that Will’s brother wouldn’t be around to drive them anywhere. Steve would probably leave soon too, unless he did decide to stick with his dad’s work though he’d still been on the fence about that.

Things were changing and Max wondered what else would change in the coming school year. She hoped not another monster. She’d really hate if the reappearance of the Upside Down became an annual thing.

“Just give me more time! Please, I’m saving up for a car now!” Billy yelled.

“Listen, even if you weren’t late, we’ve got to let a few people go anyways,” sighed his supervisor. “I’m sorry but—”

“You’re sorry? What the hell does sorry do! Huh!? Sorry doesn’t pay the bills! It doesn’t keep food in the fucking fridge!”

“Alright, if you don’t calm down now I’m going to—”

“To what!” Billy yelled, taking a step closer. “What exactly are you going to do to me?!”

“Do not make me call security!”

“Fuck you!”

Billy got a bloody nose and what he was pretty sure was a cracked rib. He didn’t think, he just barreled into every person who tried to grab him. He’d been doing so good! He was getting his fucking life together! And then his dad had taken the damn car back and everything had started to fall apart, piece after piece.

It took three people to get him on the ground. His arms were painfully forced behind his back and cuffed.

Billy stopped fighting when he got shoved into the back of a police car. His head fell forward, his breathing coming in fast and erratic. Fuck, what was he supposed to do now?

The drive to the precinct felt like it took ages. Billy was thrown in a cell with five other people. They glanced at him and then immediately away. Billy took note and simply collapsed on the ground as far away from them as he could possibly get.

He started counting the seconds but kept loosing track of the numbers so he had no idea how long it had really been. He just continued the aimless counting. One guy got taken away, two more were added to the cell. Finally a guard knocked on the bars and said, “Billy Hargrove?”

Billy let off a soft sigh and pulled himself to his feet. “Yeah?”

“Listen, you’re not being charged. Seems the store manager took pity on you. But I will keep you overnight if I need to. Do I?”

“No sir,” Billy sighed. He held his side, the motion painful.

“Do you need a doctor?”

“I’m fine,” Billy simply said.

The officer continued to stare.

Thankfully, Billy was too tired to respond with any real anger. “I’m fine,” he pressed. “Can I just go home? Please?”

“Yeah, come on kid.”

Billy walked out of the cell, occasionally gripping his side again every time a sharp pain seemed to blast through it. He had enough money to probably survive for another month if he rationed food and didn’t take from his savings for a new car, but he’d need another job soon.

“You’ve got all your books, your paper, your pencil?”

Jane nodded.

“You have that lunch I packed for you too? You won’t’ have to go through the line. You can just bring your lunch with you to the cafeteria. You know that right?”

Jane nodded.

“And you remember where all your classes are? Who your teachers are? Remember, you have at least one friend in every class.”

Jane nodded.

“And no throwing people. You understand? Get a teacher or an adult or call me if something happens but don’t use your powers. Right?”

Jane nodded.

“And don’t forget you need to—”

“Chief!” the kids yelled.

“Are you going to let her come in with us?” asked Dustin with a grin. “Or are you going to join her in class too?”

Hopper let out a tired sigh as soft laughter went through all the kids.

“We’ll look out for her,” Lucas said.

“You have been prepping her for like a week too,” Will softly murmured. “Like it was a battle ground or somethign. I’m sure she remembers it all.”

“We’ve got her,” smiled Max. “Stop worrying so much.”

“I think you’re ready,” Mike said, looking towards Jane. “Don’t you?”

She nodded. “I’m ready for school.”

Hopper let out another tired sigh before placing his hands on Jane’s shoulders. “I’ll be here to pick you up. Three fifteen exactly.

Promise.”

“Promise,” Jane repeated.

“Ok...ok good luck. Have fun!”

“Stop worrying so much Chief! You’ll get a heart attack!” laughed Dustin as their group rushed into the building. “Alright, see you guys at lunch!”

“Bye Dustin!” they yelled out, watching him run off to his first class.

“Hey, I’ll see you next period, ok?” Mike said, giving Jane a quick squeeze of her hand.

She smiled softly. “See you.”

Will and Lucas gave their goodbyes and quick words of good luck as well before heading to their first period.

Max then took Jane’s hand. “Alright, so you’ll have first period with me every day for this year,” she said. “Now, unless they give us assigned seats, we’ll get to pick and usually the ones people pick on the first day end up being their seats for the rest of the year. You never want to sit in the front if you can help it. Teachers will always call on you.”

“And we don’t want teachers to call on us,” Jane said, repeating words that Max and the others had told her.

“Right!” smirked Max. They headed to their room for math, both their eyes zeroing in on two back row seats. “Perfect. Come on.”

They sat down and Max got out her things for the class while more and more students piled in. A few looked over at the new kid but most latched onto their previously made friend groups or stayed solo. As the teacher walked in, Max nudged Jane with her foot. “You ready?”

Jane smiled. “Yes,” she whispered.

Things had been looking up for Billy. He'd finally gotten another job that was even closer and more reasonable to walk to and he could keep saving up for a car. He could do this. He could keep living.

And then he'd ended up in a hospital.

He'd gotten in a fight, not a too uncommon occurrence for him. His hand had gotten cut and though he'd thought about going to a hospital, he'd figured wrapping a bandage tightly enough and keeping it there would heal it well enough.

Instead, a few days later he ended up in the hospital after one of his housemates had called an ambulance. According to the doctors, he must have cut it on the person's tooth because it had gotten seriously infected, hence the fever that had spiked high enough to make his other housemates worry.

And like that, poof! There went all his savings towards surgery and hospital time and the ambulance and antibiotics. What little stability Billy had managed to recreate was gone again and after a few weeks of trying to keep on, he'd gotten kicked out.

The new job had gone up in flames, Billy unable to do it with his still healing hand, and that meant no income and no home. Though he'd nearly started a fight upon getting kicked out, now that Billy was wandering the streets, he couldn't really blame them. They hadn't been friends. He'd just been a tenant and with no money, he didn't have a right to be there anymore.

Everything Billy had fit in a book bag and another over the shoulder bag. The only thing he had was clothes, two packs of cigarettes, one lighter, thirty-two dollars and fifteen cents, and the antibiotics. The only jewelry he had left was his simple, half circle earring and one necklace. The rest had been sold when he'd tried to extend his stay in that house.

So that was all he had, the items in his arms and on his back.

There had been plenty of moments he'd spent the night elsewhere to avoid his dad but he'd always found some home, some acquaintance, a twenty-four hour diner, anything! And if that all failed he had his

car to sleep in. He'd never just slept on the streets and he had no idea where to go or what to do.

Eventually Billy found an alley behind some restaurant. It smelled awful but it provided more security and cover than some bench.

With a sigh Billy situated himself on the hard ground as best he could, using the bags as pillows and his jacket like a blanket. He already ached for a shower and wondered if there was a gym nearby that he could get a free membership at so he could use their showers. There wasn't anything in this area and he'd have to explore more outside his comfort zone in the hopes of finding something.

The one year anniversary of the Mind Flayer was upon them. Max couldn't help but feel her skin crawling every day that passed. She constantly looked over her shoulder, expecting something strange to happen, for government agents to come rushing in, for someone to disappear.

It was hardest on Will, and Max felt bad that every time he did something odd or zoned out, everyone just stared. She had to force herself to look elsewhere. However, what if something came out again? What if it was something new that they didn't know how to deal with?

Hopper and Joyce were on edge as the days went by and there was even a day when Hopper's paranoia had him taking Jane out of school for a bit. On the day where everything had ended, when the Mind Flayer had been burned out of Will and the gate was hopefully permanently closed, the kids skipped school and rode their bikes and skateboard over to the Byers. Hopper dropped Jane off too, Steve and Nancy came by, and Jonathan stayed on the phone for ages talking to Will and his mom and everyone else.

Max hugged Will and they all stayed huddled up in the living room. Cartoons played on the TV, games were brought out and comic books strewn across the floor. They focused on making jokes and bad puns. They played music and sung loud and out of key. They acted like kids.

When Max got home, Neil was upset that they'd gotten a call reporting her missing from school. Max remained indifferent, just watching as his yelling grew. Max was pretty sure the only reason he didn't hit her was because her mom was right there. Right now, Max couldn't have cared less. She held her head high and dealt with his anger. She'd helped Will survive the day, she'd been there to see the anniversary pass them all by.

The satisfaction about what they'd managed to survive overruled anything Neil tried to do. Besides, after dealing with demodogs and even putting Billy in his place, Neil didn't scare her half as much.

After the talk, she went to her room without dinner. Joyce had made them all an early dinner anyways so Max just went to bed early.

Waking up felt like everything was back to normal and heading to school proved that. Everyone looked calmer, looked better. Max could finally breathe easily. They'd managed a whole year without more weirdness. Finally.

Billy followed the guy, on edge and somewhat fearful. He was ready for a fight, for the guy to try and maybe take his jacket, his remaining cigarettes. But the guy never turned around. He kept talking about himself and his whole life story that Billy only partially paid attention to until they finally arrived at the building the guy had promised him. Billy walked in, letting out a tired sigh as he felt the warmth hitting his frozen bones. The place was packed and a long line was formed for food. Men, women, and kids, in varying states of dirt and disarray, sat and talked and laughed with Christmas lights strung up over head.

"Hey Jack! You find another?" asked a woman as Billy followed him to the end of the line.

"Yep," Jack said. "This is Billy. Billy, this is Jacqueline. She volunteers here a lot."

Billy inclined his head, sticking to silence as he looked around. He was forced to speak though when Jacqueline said, "That's a nasty scar. What's the story there?"

He looked down at his hand, the one that had caused him to just spiral deeper downwards until he'd ended up here. "A fight. Didn't get it properly looked at."

"Well, we have some doctors that volunteer here. It's hard to get you in if it's nothing serious, but if you ever need something looked at, I can put you on the waiting list."

Billy just nodded again. He didn't take help well and it almost hurt being here, having to admit to himself that he needed this kind of help at all. He'd tried one homeless shelter on a particularly freezing night but after a rather ugly conversation with one of the men there, Billy had braved the cold instead. The mood here was much more cheerful, but Billy imagined it was because it was Christmas and there was probably enough food for once. He doubted other days were like this.

Nobody bothered him until he sat down with his plate of food.

"First Christmas here kid?" asked a grizzled man.

"Yeah," Billy simply said.

"Well, I hate to say it, but it does get easier. You learn the ins and outs, the best places to sleep, the best places to eat, when and where you'll have the best pick for donated clothes. Just takes time," the man said.

"You've been out here a while?"

The man nodded. "Addiction. Lost me my wife and my job. I got a new one now but all the money's going to the kids, not that I mind. I make do with what I've got."

Billy looked down, focusing on his food as he tried not to wolf it all down. He hadn't had a proper meal in days.

Others tried to talk to him here and there but thankfully the older guy was content with being a silent companion. It made Billy feel less alone without forcing him to talk.

He did look up when he heard complaining though. Despite the still

long line and the arriving people, the food had disappeared. Billy could hear them saying they still had space and room for them to get warm but their supplies were out. Even on Christmas they couldn't get food for everyone.

A girl with dreads and a patchwork coat started to cry and Billy looked down at his half eaten food. His stomach still growled but he stood up, walked over, and handed it to her. He ignored the whispered thank you from who he assumed to be the mother and sat back down, pulling his coat tighter.

"Nice thing of you do."

Billy shrugged. It was complicated. It wasn't like he'd ever been in the situation before and usually seeing a kid cry just got him annoyed. This was different though. Hearing the utter despair in her small voice, that feeling of hopelessness and tragedy, Billy could understand that and it was the last thing he wanted to hear on this already shitty Christmas.

The man accepted his silent response, their eyes turning back to the table.

As the night went on and grew colder, the place became packed to the walls, body pressed against body. Even if Billy's stomach still growled from hunger, at least it was the first night in a while that his bones didn't ache.

Winter break had come and gone and Max found herself swamped with homework on the first day back. Man, couldn't the teachers have waited one more day before piling this all on them?

She groaned, lying out on her bed and going through the problems and readings when Neil walked in unannounced.

"Maxine, we need to talk."

Already she didn't like the tone he'd taken, and she steeled herself for what was about to come. "About what...sir?" She added that at the last second, figuring it was better to stay on his good side for

however long she needed to. Besides, her mom wasn't around this time to act as a deterrent.

"I know you have friends that you hang out with. That's good. It's good to have friends. But I didn't realize who they were. I'm concerned by just how many boys there are. You shouldn't be hanging around boys at your age."

Max frowned, not following the logic of that. "They're my friends. Why does it matter—"

"You're my daughter now and I just want to make sure you stay my little girl. You can understand my concern, right?"

Max really couldn't. The way he was talking had her stomach dropping and her mouth going dry. She forced herself to stay calm though. "They're just friends—"

"Are they really? Because I'm just trying to protect you. I just want you safe Maxine and I certainly don't want that nigger raising a hand to you. Understood?"

Max's eyes went wide at the word. "You're not supposed to say—"

"That's liberal bullshit talking and I don't appreciate it in my house! Do you understand Maxine? I can say what I want, when I want, and it's better for people like him to know where he stands in this country." Neil gave a huge huff and added, "Just because of their damn victories doesn't mean they're our equals. Do you understand that?"

Max definitely didn't but she imagined saying no would just escalate things. She nodded. "Yes sir."

"Good. I want you to get some proper friends. Better friends, understood?"

Would Max do that? Hell no! But she nodded all the same, still not liking the look Neil was giving her. It was that kind of look he usually got before he went in a rage. Nowadays he'd just break a lamp or something. It used to be he'd go yell at Billy for a bit and maybe knock him upside the head. Max didn't want to become the new

target. “Yes sir.”

“Thank you Maxine. I’m glad to see we understand each other.”

Max watched him leave, waiting until the door was closed before she held up her middle finger. She tried concentrating on her homework but she was too angry and confused now. She ended up throwing her books across the room instead.

“It’s a simple enough job. Most people just get beers here. You can leave the mixing to Star.”

Billy nodded in understanding as he walked through the still closed bar. Though he’d still mostly kept to himself, he’d started to learn a few familiar faces here and there and through word of mouth, he’d gotten this opportunity.

“Make sure you keep your shit in the back but otherwise I don’t care that you’re staying here. Just know a percentage will come out of your paycheck.”

“Yes sir,” Billy said.

They moved around, Billy getting a good look at the decrepit bar that somehow retained some sense of style and personality. He got a list of drinks to memorize, was shown how the cash register worked, and where cleaning supplies were, the works.

“Listen,” the guy said, “when things get rowdy, we have to deal with it ourselves. Can’t afford a guy for security alone. Just remember, it’s basically your call on whether or not to kick them out and you want to make sure your stance is clear, but not do so much damage that it turns everyone else off from the place. Got it?”

Billy nodded again.

“Good. Get to putting the chairs down and double wiping everything. We open at five on week nights. Four on the weekends.”

Billy nodded in understanding, quickly going to work as he got the place ready for the afternoon customers. He didn’t really feel that the

place was any cleaner for his work, but the owner assured him it looked perfect.

Now Billy had a few extra clothes again and a bit more money in his pocket. He had no idea how long he'd get to stay here or when he'd be able to save up enough to get his own place again. For now, he was just thankful for the cot in the back and the small shower he could use that was left over from when the place had been an apartment.

It was nice being able to buy food from his own earnings again rather than dumpster diving and stealing people's wallets. He wasn't great at pick-pocketing and the encounters more often ended with a fight. Still, he'd done it sparingly, only when he was really desperate for anything to eat.

He wouldn't have to worry about that now. At least for however long this lasted.

"Oh screw off!" Max immediately regretted the words the moment they left her mouth. She stalked away though, not wanting to look at her friends' shocked faces.

They were in the junkyard, the weather finally getting warmer. She found a car and climbed up on top, crossing her legs and staring out into the distance. Though Neil hadn't hit her, she'd had to deal with his increasing shit and interest in her life again and again. Her friends had just been trying to help, trying to get her to talk, but she'd exploded instead, throwing a rock so hard that it shattered one of the dirty windows.

For a while, she got her piece, simultaneously sulking and ashamed at what she'd done. However, a few minutes passed and she finally heard one of them climbing up on top of the car with her.

"Hey," Lucas softly said.

Max acknowledged him with a nod but didn't say more. It took a while for her to force her anger down but it eventually calmed and she got a tired, "Sorry. I wasn't really aiming for you guys."

"I mean, we figured as much," Lucas said with a small shrug. "But you've just...you've been getting really upset lately, you know? So easily. At everything. What's going on?"

"I think...I think Neil's rubbing off on me," Max softly admitted. "It's just...I'm trying! I'm trying to fight him but it's so hard. He's bigger than me, has my mom's blasted support, I just can't fight him without making myself look like the villain! And-and it makes me so angry! He's such a bastard and my mom can't see it and just...some nights I feel so damn alone."

"You've got us."

"That doesn't change what happens at home."

"Well," Lucas carefully said. "I don't know. If we all worked together, I'm pretty sure we could tackle him and throw him in the quarry or something."

Max actually snorted at that, a smile finally breaking across her face.

Lucas gave her a playful nudge. "See? You got us. Whatever shit happens at home, you can come running to us. Whenever."

"Yeah?"

"Totally. And I mean...we could always ask El to..."

Max let out a proper laugh at that, all sorts of wicked ideas coming to mind. "No-no that would probably only make it worse," she admitted. "Even if it would be hilarious."

Lucas smiled in agreement. "Just remember, you can count on us. If something's bothering you, we don't mind talking about it, or giving you space, or just whatever. You know? Just...tell us."

"I will. I promise," Max replied. "Sorry about the meltdown."

"It happens. Maybe it's just something about this place. Mike and I had a fight here and El threw me off."

Max winced as she imagined that.

"Eh, I did kind of deserve it," Lucas sheepishly admitted. "But seriously, just remember you always have us. Through thick and thin."

Max turned and hugged him tight. A shuddering sigh escaped her lips but she didn't feel a need to cry. Most of the negative emotions had already escaped with that outburst. Now it just felt good knowing her friends didn't blame her.

"Thanks Lucas," Max sighed, finally moving back and jumping off the car.

"I don't understand! I did what you asked," Billy tried. Things had been going so well in the past few weeks. He should have known not to get comfortable but this was the last thing he'd expected to get him booted out the door. All he'd done was his job.

"What you did was hit an old friend of mine and one of the guys who helped me open this bar."

"But how could I have known!? They were causing a scene and I took care of it like I always have," Billy fought back.

"I'm sorry kid, but it doesn't matter what you think happened. From their point of view, you defended the faggot and hit them. They've still got a stake in this bar and they voted you out."

Billy looked down at the ground. He hadn't realized that. He wasn't sure if he would have done the same thing if he'd known-but no. No he probably would have. One of the guys had just reminded him of his dad. The way he'd been acting, his language, Billy only had the courage to attack his dad once, right before turning and running away. But attacking someone like his dad? It brought with it all the hatred and none of the fear.

That simple fact meant he didn't regret his actions. He would have done it again. He just couldn't believe it meant starting at square one again.

"You can stay for the next two nights if you want, try and find out

where you're going—”

“No thanks,” Billy replied. “Just give me my last paycheck and I'll be out of your hair.”

The guy let out a tired sigh but finally nodded. At the very least, he looked like he regretted what had happened but he still chose those assholes over Billy.

Billy just waited until he came back, this time with cash rather than a check.

“Just to make it easier on you.”

“Thanks,” Billy muttered though his voice clearly showed he wasn't. He went to the back and quickly packed the rest of his things in a new bag. With a sigh, he left the bar and started off on the streets again.

Maybe he should leave Chicago. Get a bus ticket and go somewhere else. But that wouldn't really fix anything, would it? It would just change the location, and Billy really didn't want to go through all that trouble if he was just going to have to sleep on the streets anyways.

With that in mind, he walked down the streets, keeping an eye open for any good places to hide.

Somehow they'd managed to get through Jane's entire first school year without weird shit happening once. Talk about beating the odds.

Now they were all at the graduation ceremony. This time Max got to go with her friends and sit by them as it came time for Nancy to walk across. Jonathan had come down, already finishing his finals for the second semester, and he planned to stay for the rest of the summer.

Steve was there and so were Joyce and Hopper to give their support. The Wheelers sat to the side of them in their own little bubble with Holly on Mrs. Wheeler's lap. Mike focused more on chatting with Jane who was on his other side and Lucas and Dustin who were beside her than talking to his parents.

When the time came, they all cheered, their row jumping up and down and Mike yelling out an old nickname that had Nancy shooting them all a semi-annoyed glare.

She rushed over the moment the principle announced them graduated though, hugging them all and kissing Jonathan before finally turning to her parents. It would be weird once Nancy was gone though she would at least be closer than Jonathan, heading off to Chicago for college.

Nancy went off with Jonathan and Steve after everyone finished with the congratulations. The parents were forgotten as the young teens turned to each other, trying to decide what to do with the rest of their day and what plans they'd make for the summer.

Max couldn't help but grin. Already she could tell this was going to be a great break.

If there was an upside to being homeless right now, it was that it was finally summer and Billy didn't have to worry about freezing on some bench. He'd gotten quick one-day, two-day, style jobs here and there, enough to keep food in his stomach and buy cigarettes every once in a while but nothing serious or full time.

He'd moved around the city a bit in the past few months, finding the best places to sleep and avoid any cops. It looked like it was going to rain for the next few days though so Billy looked for something a bit better. Most of the places to sleep filled up with water when it rained. He had to be around the shit and trash enough as it was. He really didn't want to sleep in it.

Because of that, he avoided sewers and that one half crumbling structure, looking more at old warehouses and abandoned buildings on the edge of town. Sometimes they could be risky, belonging to people or corporations that no longer used them but still came looking to scare off any of the homeless with security or cops. However, as the first drops of rain hit Billy's head, he decided to take his chances and break into one.

The place was large and looked like it had belonged to some type of

manufacturing company before going under. There was still a lot of equipment about and as Billy moved deeper into the structure, he noted that there were bits and pieces that seemed almost personal and ill fitting of the place. Did someone live here?

He didn't really care. If someone showed up, he'd deal with it. For now, his eyes just zeroed in on a lone chair that sat on a landing midway up. There were stairs that continued onto a second floor, probably just a storage area, offices, or more manufacturing equipment. Billy stopped at that first landing and collapsed in the chair. Outside, the rain started to hammer against the windowpane. Seemed he'd found shelter just in time.

Billy closed his eyes, just taking a break before he had to think about where he was going to sleep and what he'd sleep on.

However, the feeling of movement behind him had him jumping to his feet. He rolled out of the way, just barely missing a fist connecting with his head.

“Hold it.”

The sound of a gun cocking had Billy freezing.

“Hands up. Turn around. Slowly.”

Billy straightened up and did so. In front of him was a large man and at the very top of the stairs some kid. Movement caused him to glance back down into the major part of the factory and he was shocked to see two women and a man. Where the hell had they come from? He could see the big guy and kid sneaking up from behind but there didn't look to be any hiding places below.

He didn't have time to think about it more, the kid suddenly talking as she stepped forward. Wait, she was in charge?

“What do you want?”

She had an odd accent that Billy couldn't quite place. There were bits that were definitely influenced by Chicago's speech patterns suggesting she'd lived here for a bit but there were other influences there too.

"I was just looking to get out of the rain alright?" Billy said, eyes flicking between her and the gun.

"Looks like being stuck in the downpour would do you some good!" laughed the woman with the wild hair and bow.

"Fuck you," Billy instinctively shot back. The fact that the woman only laughed made his eye twitch but he held back.

"Hmm, we did say that having six would make the next job easier," the kid slowly said.

"We don't know this guy! How the hell can we trust him!" yelled the guy with the Mohawk from below.

The kid cocked her head and took another step. There was a look of concentration on her face and Billy noted how blood started to well up in her nose and run into her lips.

"He has anger. We can always use that," the kid said as she wiped away the blood. When she spoke next, she actually addressed Billy. "What would you do for food and a warm place to sleep?"

"Add in a place to shower and fucking anything," Billy muttered. He'd tried the honest way but he was tired. Right now he was up for anything. "What the hell do you guys do? Deal something like drugs?"

The one with the bow laughed along with the Mohawk guy who shouted, "Ha! That's cute Curly. We don't fucking sell drugs."

Billy glared at him for the nickname but focused back on the kid as she finally came up to him and the big guy dropped his gun.

"I'm guessing your life hasn't been easy."

Billy snorted, finally dropping his hands and muttering, "What gave you that idea?"

The kid gave a small smirk of amusement. "We'll give this a trial run. We could use an extra pair of hands. What's your name?"

“Billy.”

“Welcome Billy. That’s Funshine, Dottie, Axel, and Mick.”

Billy raised an eyebrow at the weird names and asked, “And you?”

“Kali.”

“First of all, when? Second of all, when!?” cried Mike.

Dustin reached over and plucked the badge off Steve’s chest. “Holy shit guys, it’s real.”

Steve rolled his eyes. “What? Did you think I was just playing dress up?”

“Kind of?” admitted Max.

“Shiny,” Jane softly commented, taking the badge from Dustin.

“What Mike said, when did this happen?” asked Lucas.

Steve scratched the back of his head. “Well...I mean it wasn’t intended. I got in a fight with my dad and stormed off. Happened to run into the Chief and we talked some and just...yeah. One thing lead to another.”

“Are you going to stick with it?” asked Will.

“You totally should. It’s badass!” Dustin exclaimed. “Do you get to carry a gun?”

“Technically but I want to get more training before that.”

“So you’re staying in Hawkins?” asked Lucas.

“For now, I guess so.”

“I guess that’s pretty cool,” said Mike. “With Jonathan and Nancy in college, it’s nice not everything is changing right away.”

“Oh yeah, you should call her,” Max said. “Or we could take that trip

to Chicago we promised we would!”

Steve chuckled at that. “How about we give her a bit more time to settle into her new apartment before we all just pounce on her, huh?”

“Fine,” sighed Dustin, “but we should totally use her as an excuse to go to Chicago sometime.”

“And we could take the sheriff’s car and power up the lights so we get there in record time,” grinned Lucas.

“Uh, no.”

The kids laughed as Steve put on his mom face and shook his head.

“Wait-hold it!” yelled Dustin. “Does this mean you’re not cool anymore? Because that would suck.”

“If it was anyone else, I’d say it makes them doubly cool,” Mike replied, “but you dated my sister so you’re kind of low on the cool bar for me.”

“Thanks for that,” snorted Steve.

“Don’t worry man. Being a deputy definitely still makes you cool,” said Lucas.

Max and Will nodded in agreement.

“Well I’m glad my coolness hasn’t been hurt by this change of career,” snorted Steve.

“Can we still get like one ride in the car with the lights on?” begged Lucas.

“I’m not sure that’s a good idea,” Will tried but everyone else quickly spoke over him.

“It’ll be fun!” Dustin yelled.

“Just around the block,” Max said.

“You’ll be cooler for it,” Mike tried.

“Please?” Jane asked, finally speaking up again.

The kids quickly made Jane the center of attention, a smart move on their part as it was always hardest denying Jane anything when she got those wide eyes and hopeful looks.

“Oh....fine! Get in,” groaned Steve as all the kids rushed to the car and piled in.

How was it that in the matter of four weeks, Billy’s life had taken such a sharp left? Wait, no, that wasn’t descriptive enough. Billy’s life had taken such a drastic turn that he’d spun out, rolled down a hill, fell into a rabbit hole, and ended up in fucking Wonderland. That was how god damn different this whole thing felt.

He’d seen firsthand what Kali could do. At first, he’d just thought, she’s a kid? Why the hell would anyone follow her? But then he found out just how fucking terrifying and badass she was.

Though her main power was making people see things that weren’t there, she also got a feel for people’s emotions. It wasn’t quite mind reading but if she focused hard enough, she could detect a person’s general feelings which sometimes helped her in choosing what to make that person see. If she’d already felt their terror around spiders, then she knew that conjuring that up was usually the best bet in freaking them out and making them do her bidding.

Powers. Government conspiracies. Vigilante justice. Just what the hell had Billy gotten himself in to?

Perhaps he should have said fuck it and left. It wasn’t his fight. But Kali gave him more than just a roof over his head. She was able to give him food, a place to sleep and even call home. The security that she could bring brought with it a certain amount of respect and a feeling that he owed her something in return. Billy suspected that no one else had quite a story like Kali’s but they stayed for those very reasons that gave him a reason to stay too.

She gave them a purpose, directed their anger at society into something useful. They always had food and clothes and a place to

call their own.

It was oddly nice.

Billy learned that they'd left the area for a bit after nearly being caught by the police. However, after things had cooled down, they'd moved back, just on a different side of Chicago. Apparently there was movement in the area of men and women connected with the organizations that moved behind the public eye and stole children and experimented on the unknown without any kind of check. Something big was happening and though they still had their smaller targets, Kali was hoping to find who it was that was pulling the strings.

Billy had gone on two actual missions, mainly acting as a lookout or a heavy lifter when things needed to be moved. He wasn't naïve to what they were doing with their targets, he started to get the full picture pretty early on. However, things changed when Funshine walked up to him.

"Have you ever fired one?" the large man asked, holding up a gun.

"No," Billy admitted. He could get pretty violent in a fight and knock a man down in one hit. Getting a knife or a bat in his hands only increased his lethality, but he'd never actually fired a gun.

"Shit Curly, really?" asked Axel. "Your dad never take you to the shooting range or something? Have some man on man time with you?"

Billy really hated that stupid nickname but Axel still hadn't let up on it. At least everyone else called him by his actual name. "We had a gun in the house," he responded, "but my dad never trusted me anywhere near it."

"Well you've proven yourself trustworthy to us," Kali responded. She gave a firm nod and Funshine held the gun out for Billy to take it.

He hesitated, still unsure.

"Ah, come on. Don't be a pussy," whined Dottie.

Billy rolled his eyes and snatched the gun away. It felt odd in his hands, cold and heavier than he'd expected.

"Funshine will teach you how to shoot," Kali said. "You'll need it in our next mission."

To think that Jane was already in her second year of school and it had gone so smoothly too. She'd ended up in the lower level classes during her first year, especially in English, but she'd already made great progress and caught up, or in some cases even surpassed, her peers.

In the past year, Max and Will had become proper friends with her. Though they shared similar experiences, Mike, Lucas, and Dustin knew her a lot better and had been with her through the entire Demogorgon experience. Will had only really gotten stories and Max had met her for a split second at the very end.

It felt good being able to actually call her a friend and no longer worrying about their being a rival or an outsider to her. Will had felt the same way despite not speaking about it until later. With El back in the picture, he'd thought he'd been replaced but their group of friends quickly proved that wasn't the case.

Max continued to teach Jane how to ride a skateboard and Will went from giving small pointers to actually giving Jane lessons on how to draw.

There were no longer subgroups between them. They all stuck together through their first year of high school and as the second one started, they were possibly even closer.

Jane was still shy and preferred actions over words but she'd slowly become more social even though she always stuck close to someone in their group. The past year there'd only been one incident where Jane had thrown a guy into a wall, some ass that had tried punching Mike.

Now on their first day back, Hopper started giving Jane the talk again.

“Let’s try to keep those types of incidents down to zero this time, ok?”

Jane nodded.

“And I made sure that you had a class with at least one of your friends again. You remember where all the rooms are right?”

Jane nodded.

“And I packed you lunch and—”

“I think I have it,” Jane smiled, this time beating the others from yelling at him. “I’ll be fine.”

Hopper let out a tired sigh but nodded. “Ok...ok yes. You are fine. Aren’t you?”

“But only because of you,” smiled Jane, moving forward and hugging Hopper tight.

“I’ll be here to pick you up!” Hopper called out as the kids grabbed Jane and dragged her back off to school.

The only reason Billy didn’t get left behind was because Funshine grabbed his arm and pulled him along. Like a lot of things in Billy’s life, he hadn’t really thought. He’d just acted and in that split second following it, nothing had been wrong. He just let loose like he always did and if there were consequences, he dealt with those later.

But as Funshine practically threw him into the back of the truck, the facts of what had just happened wouldn’t leave his mind. This past week he’d pulled the trigger again and again, figuring out the best stance and how to hit the target. So when the guy had jumped Dottie, that’s what he’d done. He’d pulled the trigger.

Would he have killed Harrington if Max hadn’t intervened? Possibly. Were there others that he’d just let loose on and they’d made it only because someone had dragged Billy away? Again, it was possible.

But that was the thing, wasn’t it? Whether or not he could have done

it before, the point was he hadn't. He hadn't dealt with the aftermath, hadn't had to worry about it. But now...

His hands were trembling. They wouldn't stop.

"Christ, didn't you say you were from the west coast?" asked Mick from the driver's seat as they sped away. "You look like a damn ghost."

"Ah, I think the kid's got a weak stomach," Axel snorted.

"Don't tell me you got cold feet now—"

Kali cut Dottie off with a snap of her fingers. She snapped again, directing Billy's attention to her and out of his head.

"Don't try and sugarcoat it. You killed a man."

God, she said it so simply. Like it was nothing. Like it wasn't a life he'd just taken—

"Billy!"

He jolted.

"You cannot stay innocent in this game," Kali pressed, "and we don't need people who can't handle this. You're giving those tortured souls a voice while keeping countless others from going through the same type of torment."

The others stayed silent. Billy wondered if Kali had ever given them a talking but he doubted it.

"Look."

Billy glanced over and saw the dead man before quickly shutting his eyes. "Kali, please—"

"Look at what you did," she demanded.

He listened to the sound of the van. The wheels turning, the engine running, the changing speeds. It took a while before he finally

opened his eyes again. The body was wedged between Funshine and the backdoors, blood dripping down the bullet wound in his neck.

“You killed him and Dottie is alive because of it.”

“Hey!” Dottie exclaimed. “I could have—”

“Hush!” Kali demanded. “But there are more. You’ve avenged those that can’t take actions into their own hands. You’ve saved others from such a fate. You’ve traded one life for many.”

With a blink of his eyes, the dead man disappeared but in his place sat Billy’s father.

“He hurt you. He damaged you. He changed the course of your life,” Kali pressed. “You never got the chance to retaliate. You never got your revenge, to make him see your true anger. But you can use that anger to help others, to get back at the idea of him and bullies like him. That is what we do. Are you willing to still follow?”

Billy closed his eyes if only to escape the image of his father. His fingernails dug into his skin, blood welling up from how tightly he clenched his fists. He thought about how he’d just ended another life.

But then he thought about how being with Kali he’d finally begun to let out that steam that had been building and building throughout his entire life. He thought about the security, the roof over his head, the feeling of purpose that he now had. He thought about kids being put through varying levels of emotional and physical torment, kids like him and then fucking lab rats like Kali. And yet they were still the lucky ones. At least they were alive and had the chance to express their voice.

He nodded. Kali had hit all the points. She’d known just what buttons to push, to keep him from backing out. “Yes,” he whispered.

“You’re doing just fine, kid,” Funshine softly rumbled. Usually it annoyed Billy that they all called him kid, even if he was the youngest by three years, excluding Kali. But right now he took the name as a small comfort.

Agreeing to this, choosing this life despite its consequences, it still

wasn't a path he had to take alone. He had people he could lean on for the first time.

Max would have argued she was a bit old for trick-r-treating. Most kids their age were making parties for close friends or heading to those big senior get-togethers that drew beer and cops. However, seeing as it was Jane's second time doing it, she didn't mind being part of one of the older groups on the block if only for Jane to experience something Max had took for granted. Besides, there was a lot more free candy when going from house to house rather than some party.

Last year, Jane had gone as a simple ghost, a sheet with holes that was pulled over her head. By this point, they'd introduced her to a lot more and showed her that the costumes didn't have to be scary. Jane went as Andie from *Pretty In Pink*. Max, Lucas, and Dustin did a group dress up from *Aliens*, and Mike and Will did a *Friday the 13th* centric one.

The Chief had backed up a little more since last year which Jane definitely appreciated, though he still set a curfew just in case. Granted so did Joyce though no one could really blame either parent for their over protectiveness.

They met up at the Byers home, parents coming to pick them up long after they'd gone through their candy and watched at least one full movie. Max made sure to give Neil the wrong time so that the guys were already gone except for Will.

They hadn't had a major talk about her choice of friends for a while and Max had been all the more careful about avoiding Neil whenever she was hanging out with them. Thankfully, Neil spotted Jane leaving with Hopper and whatever warped logic he followed seemed appeased. He didn't try and start a fight and at least Halloween night wasn't sullied by him.

"Know how to play poker?" asked Axel.

Billy shook his head and Axel gestured for him to come over.

Dottie let out a large laugh. “You’re the last person to teach anyone how to play!”

“You cheat!”

“Haven’t been caught.”

“Doesn’t mean you don’t god damn cheat!”

Dottie laughed again as Mick muttered, “Maybe you’re just shit at it. Ever thought of that?”

“You fuck off, you shut up, and kid, sit so I can teach you a thing.”

Billy couldn’t help but chuckle a bit at that. “What the hell. Why not?”

For the next hour, they went back and forth on the rules, Dottie and Mick continuously chiming in, usually to annoy Axel, and Funshine occasionally giving some proper advice. As Axel showed him the ways to win, Kali suddenly said, “Or you could win like this.”

She’d been looking over a file that they’d stolen from one guy’s house but she joined in now with a small grin. Billy couldn’t see what she’d done but it had Axel throwing the cards up with a groan and shouting, “This is why you’re not allowed to play!”

“Not allowed?” she smirked. “I don’t play because I’d feel horrible about making you all lose so terribly.”

“Do you even know the rules of poker?” asked Axel. “Because I don’t think I’ve seen you play it once.”

“I know enough,” Kali said. She sat down. “How about this? We play in teams. I get the newbie and you can have Dottie and Funshine. That should balance it out.”

“What? Like one of us wins and we split the earnings? That’s not exactly how poker works,” snorted Axel.

“Can’t it just be me and Funshine?” whined Dottie. “Axel brings us down too much.”

“Oh fuck off! And you don’t play poker in teams anyways.”

“Well we can make it work for this.” Kali snapped at Billy. “Don’t let me down kid.”

“Alright, powers or not, you’re like two years younger than me,” snorted Billy. “No.”

Kali grinned at him as Alex let out another tired groan before grabbing up the cards and reshuffling them again. They played with cigarettes for now, having more of them than cash on hand. Of course, Kali left them all in the dust but since she didn’t smoke, she pushed the pile of cigarettes over to Billy.

“That’s so not fucking fair!” groaned Axel. “Give me one.”

“Not a chance,” Billy grinned as he place one between his lips and lit it.

“Hold up, you have a sister?” asked Dustin.

“Why didn’t we know about this?” asked Lucas.

“I couldn’t help her,” Jane softly said. They all sat around her, waiting expectantly for what she was going to say next. “But I think I can now. She’s in Chicago again. I want to find her.”

“Again?” asked Mike. “Have you been like...keeping tabs on her or something?”

“To make sure she was safe,” Jane murmured. “She won’t want to see me again. Hopper won’t want me to go, but I need to.”

“Well we’re coming with you. Obviously,” said Max.

“But how?” Dustin asked.

“We have that fieldtrip to the museum in Chicago coming up,” Will quickly said. “We can use that and sneak away during the day.”

“If we’re going to try and help El’s sister, I highly doubt that’s going

to magically come about in a day,” Lucas said.

“Yeah, but when else are we going to get permission from our parents to run off to Chicago?” asked Dustin. “None of us have a license and the earliest any of us can drive is in March.”

“What about Steve—” tried Will.

“He’s got a job though,” Max replied just as Mike said, “And you know he’s going to tell Hopper. He follows him around like a lost dog or something.”

“I want to go soon,” Jane murmured, causing everyone to pause and look at her. “I took a truck before. I can do it again—”

“No! No!” the kids all yelled out before Jane could finish.

“No,” repeated Mike, “we’re going with you and the fieldtrip is in about a week. We’ve all gotten permission to go, right?”

They nodded.

“See? So we’ll go then. It’s no big deal.”

“We’ll get in a lot of trouble,” sighed Will.

“What’s new?” snorted Lucas. “It’s the best chance we have at all going and getting around Hopper.”

“So we just wait a few more days until that trip. Are you ok with that Jane?” asked Max.

Jane hesitated before slowly inclining her head.

“Then it’s settled. We’ll meet up at my house and figure out what we’ll need to bring. My dad should have a map of the city from when he last went there on business so we can use that to figure out what route we’re going to take.”

“Deal,” Lucas replied.

They all shook on it.

Billy was leaning back on his bed, flipping through some dime-store novel he'd stolen from a gas station they'd been at. He didn't read often but oddly enough, he found there was more time to try new things now than how his old life had been.

He was really more skimming it but he was still relaxed. He'd never been able to do this before which was ironic considering what his life was becoming. But he felt safer here than he ever had at home and unlike the other tenants, and landlords, and employers he'd come across, these people felt like friends. He'd proven himself to them and there had been moments where leaving Billy behind would have been so much easier.

But they never had. They'd always come back and Kali had fought for him.

No one had ever fought for Billy before. It was a good feeling.

Today was a lazy day, everyone doing their own things. Around dinner they'd come together and continue talking about their next target but otherwise there wasn't much work to be done for now. Billy would probably go off and practice with Funshine for a bit, still not completely comfortable with guns. However, he was getting there and his accuracy was definitely increasing.

Billy continued to go from page to page, mostly getting the gist of the ridiculous mystery as he laughed every now and then. He got to chapter seven when he felt it.

It was like his heart had stopped. It hadn't been long but he'd felt it. A jolt of some kind, a skip. Something was missing. A piece of his life maybe?

Pushing up from his bed, he hurried down to where the others had been playing poker again. Dottie, Axel, and Mick were there. They all looked like they'd been suddenly shocked or stunned and had no idea what could have caused it.

"You feel that shit too?" asked Axel.

Billy nodded.

“Something did that!” Dottie yelled. “What was it! What!”

“Calm down,” groaned Mick. “You’re not helping anything.”

“Then explain why my heart just skipped a damn beat!”

“Drugs!”

“And all of us just experienced the same side effect—”

“I don’t know!”

Just then, a door slammed open and they all watched as Funshine marched in. Funshine had certainly proven himself not to be the kind of man he looked. Though he could be terrifying, he was more often incredibly funny and kind and polite. He had shocked Billy at first until he’d grown used to the man’s unique personality. Billy was shocked again though. Funshine had shown plenty of sides in the months that Billy had known him.

But Billy had never seen him confused. Never fearful.

“Oh shit,” whispered Mick.

“She’s gone. They’ve got Ms. Kali.”

2. Chapter 1: A Brewing Storm

Notes for the Chapter:

So this chapter came out really quickly mainly because I had a bad start to the week so instead of studying and doing adult stuff I just sat and wrote for hours on end. I'll say again, the next chapter WILL NOT get out this early (unless this month just ends up not being mine lol) but I'll keep working as steadily as I can.

I made a playlist too because that always helps me with my writing and planning out so if you're curious here it is: <https://8tracks.com/changethecircumstances/chicago-the-pulse-of-a-m-upsidee-r-i-downc-a>

Anyways, thanks for the comments and kudos and I hope you enjoy this. It didn't go exactly as planned and I ended up putting off the reunion between Billy and Max for one more chapter but don't worry it's coming! Anyways, thanks again and I hope you enjoy :)

Max finished getting ready by putting her walkie-talkie in her book bag and zipping it up. The sun wasn't even up yet, but the bus left at seven.

Just then her mom walked in, a small frown falling on her face. "Do you really need all that? You won't be back until long after school's ended today."

"We have to write an essay on something there. I figured I'd take some notes," Max lied as she pulled her bag on. "Some of the other kids are doing it too." Technically those kids were only her friends but it was something.

"Alright, I was just curious. I swear, you tell me nothing anymore," sighed her mom. "We leave in five just so you know. If you're ready,

go grab something for breakfast.”

“I will,” Max promised. She watched her mom go, a small ache forming in her chest. She’d talked so little to her in the past year. There had been attempts to broach the subject of Neil, but when her mom hadn’t listened then, the less significant discussions got buried too.

Max walked out of her room and to the kitchen.

She’d always loved her mom but they had never been friends like some parents. There’d been an even greater disconnect between them what with her mother’s ideas on how she should dress and act and what futures were appropriate for her. Too often her mother seemed more concerned with trying to live through Max’s life rather than asking Max what she wanted.

Taking an apple from the fruit basket, she headed to the front porch to sit and wait.

The early days of completely trusting her mom, of being able to talk to her about anything, those days were gone even if Max excluded the secrets involving the Upside Down. They were just too different.

“Alright, are you ready honey?”

Max looked back and nodded, unable to keep her smile completely happy. Either her mother didn’t notice or she’d already given up asking questions. It was somewhat a final nail for Max as she got in the car, and they drove towards the school. At the very least she hadn’t had to deal with Neil this morning.

Once there, she said goodbye to her mom and rushed over to the line where Dustin and Will were already waiting. They too had book bags on with similar items inside though they’d agreed Dustin be the snack keeper since the excursion would likely take a while. Mike was going to bring the map and Lucas would get some of his dad’s better equipment like binoculars and the like.

“You bring your walkie-talkie?” asked Dustin.

“Duh,” Max replied, beginning to bounce up and down on her toes.

Dustin and Will looked just as eager.

“Well look at that, the nerds are excited for the stupid museum trip. Big surprise there.”

“Oh fuck off Greg,” grumbled Dustin which had Max and Will laughing into their hands. They were still very much social outcasts but they weren’t at the bottom of the food chain anymore. People like Greg weren’t too surprising and pretty easy to deal with. All they had to do was fire back with their own words, and Max definitely wasn’t afraid to punch a bully back if it got to that.

“So,” Will quickly whispered, “we’re going during lunch, right?”

“Yep. The teacher’s are way more likely to have their guard down when we head off to lunch. Especially Mrs. Brinkley. Pretty sure she’d sell us all for half a corn chip,” Dustin grinned. “Oh look! Lucas! Over here!”

Not long after Lucas rushed over, Mike showed up too and the teachers called everyone onto the bus. Max bit her lip as she sat down and looked out the window. Where was El? They were leaving any minute. Where was she!?

“She’s coming, right,” whispered Lucas as he leaned over Max’s seat. Dustin popped up beside him, looking around with a small frown on his face.

“We would know if she’d disappeared and gone herself, right?” Mike whispered from in front of Max. “Hopper would have been all over it. Yeah?”

Will wrung his hands, his nerves clearly getting the better of him as they all stared out the window. Seconds turned to minutes, the other students excitedly talking or already asleep, taking back those minutes they’d sacrificed to be here. The teachers spoke in a group outside before going to their respective buses.

“Alright, time to—”

“Wait!” yelled Mike just as he watched Hopper pull up and screech to a halt.

The way their teacher murmured, “I swear that man—” Suggested she too had been under Hop’s spell before all his attention had been bought by supernatural forces and a new daughter.

It was actually better this way. Now Hopper couldn’t see that the only other kids with book bags were their group, and he wouldn’t get suspicious. After quickly hugging Jane, he waited by the side as she rushed onto the bus and hurried straight to Mike’s seat.

“We were worried something had happened,” Will quickly said.

“He overslept,” Jane replied with a small, amused smile. All the teens rolled their eyes as the teacher called out, “Alright, settle down now. We’re doing role one more time and then we’re off. No bathroom breaks so I hope you went beforehand!”

Everyone sounded off one by one, the teacher nodded to the bus driver and sat down, and then they were pulling onto the road. Max was giddy in all the best and worst ways. She wanted to find Jane’s sister, this Kali. But taking a step in this direction just had to be inviting trouble, didn’t it? They’d managed nearly two full years of no Upside Down, or bad men in suits and coats, or just supernatural strangeness in general.

Even if all strangeness decided to hold off, there was no guarantee that Kali would welcome them. From what Jane had told them, they hadn’t ended things in the best of ways. And even then, what was next? Jane hadn’t exactly explained how she planned to help her sister.

Max didn’t focus too much on trying to figure out what would happen. Whatever the future held, they would soon find out anyways. She just focused on chatting with Will and the others around them as the buses continued down long stretches of road. The trees slowly changed from dense populations to more common fields and interstates instead of highways.

“They have some Monte’s on exhibit,” Will suddenly said. During the drive he was mostly doodling but he now joined the conversation again.

“We’ve got more important things to do than look at some paintings,” muttered Lucas.

“We’re not leaving until halfway through anyways,” Mike shot back.
“We can go find the Montes.”

“Will can show us all the good tips for being a master, huh?” joked Dustin.

“I-I don’t know about that—”

“I bet you could even improve some of them,” Max said, nudging him in the side.

“I wouldn’t quite say that,” Will replied with a shy look as everyone kindly teased and poked him.

They continued to laugh and talk as the bus drew down on the city and turned off the interstate.

Steve nodded to Hopper as he came into the diner. They’d gotten into this pattern of eating together before or after shifts. There was always a feeling that they could talk more openly without the police or Hop’s secretary hanging around. They’d slipped up a few times, referencing things that had everyone else staring at them like they were crazy.

On days like this, when the sun was shining through the autumn leaves and everyone was smiling and the biggest crime had been an angry neighbor clipping down someone’s hedge, Steve couldn’t help but agree. He did feel a little crazy for all his paranoia and extra worry. Since the government had completely abandoned Hawkins Lab—and they knew that for sure! They checked regularly, going through the empty building and the area to make sure it remained empty. But since things had calmed down, some days Steve woke up and wondered if it had all been a dream.

All he had to do was look at his badge and remember what his job was to discredit that thought though. If things had gone as planned, he’d probably be stuck working alongside his father. He’d work nine to five in a tiny cubicle and one thing would lead to another and he’d

end up in a house similar but just not quite as big as his dad's because of course he wouldn't be as successful and, subconsciously, he would always know he hadn't been meant for it and—

Yeah. Even if being a sheriff's deputy in a town like Hawkins was somewhat dull now, it was certainly a better life than what he would have lived. And by living it, he would always have to remember the terrifying, weird shit that had led him to this moment, even if everyone else looked at him like he was a bit coo-coo from time to time.

Hopper sat down with a grunt as Dottie slid his usual order in front of him in seconds.

"Thanks," he sighed, immediately digging in as Steve asked, "Finish dropping off El with the kids?"

"Yeah, woke up late though."

Steve chuckled. "It explains the disheveled look."

Hopper let out another grunt, both turning to silence as they ate for a few minutes. Steve had always trusted Hopper since the first Demogorgon attack but he trusted him doubly so now. He knew the kids, or he supposed more accurately the 'teens'-Christ they were growing up-didn't like that he always told Hopper about the shit they were planning.

At their age, it was hard not to feel invincible and considering that all their parents except for Joyce had never seen the truth of what was going on, Steve could understand their irritation. But they needed to realize that Hopper and Joyce were there for them, even if their own parents weren't. Admittedly, Steve was a bit afraid they were pulling away from him because of it, but he was almost twenty damn it! He had a job, his own apartment now, he was just trying to be responsible.

He let out a tired sigh. His spirits were lifted though when Dottie came by and topped off their coffee. Steve immediately went to pour sugar and cream into it.

“You know, Dustin is still trying to get me to drink it black and get me into donuts,” Steve laughed, the thought of the kids reminding him of all of Dustin’s little tips and tweaks to Steve’s job and uniform. “He says I’m not a proper cop until I do.”

“At least you’re finally out of your parent’s house,” Hopper said with a knowing grin.

“Christ, you mean at least Powell and Callahan can finally stop getting onto me about that. I swear those two. Being more focused on the fact that their deputy was living with his parents than actual criminal activity is just infuriating at times. I want to grab them and shove the truth in their face and make them realize the world is bigger than just this town.”

“Ah, they’re just harmless Steve. Besides, they wouldn’t be able to handle the truth.”

Steve couldn’t help but snort. “Harmless isn’t really the best quality for a policeman, is it?”

“Maybe not, but it does make it easier to slip things by them and the rest of this town.”

“True enough. Speaking of that...”

“Still nothing,” sighed Hopper. “I’ve tried calling a few more times but the line’s finally disconnected and it’s not like there are colleagues of his that I can get in touch with.”

“I kind of want to be mad that he just dropped us like that,” sighed Steve. “He wasn’t our friend but...”

“Dr. Owens helped us longer than I thought he would, even when considering everything. He definitely didn’t have to keep us informed about whether or not the government was trying to set up shop again near us.”

“Yeah, but not even a goodbye.”

“The man’s got a damn busy life, particularly considering he didn’t take my advice and retire from the whole business,” snorted Hopper.

"He probably moved, got caught up with some other experiment I want no part of, and just forgot."

"I couldn't imagine just going back to it like nothing had happened," Steve sighed as he finished up his plate.

"I'd like to imagine his sense of ethics have approved but as long as the kids are safe and they stay out of our backyard, I don't want even a hint of what they're doing to slip our way."

"Fair enough," Steve replied.

They finished up their breakfast before heading over to the station. Right away, Florence came up to them with a disgruntled expression. At least Steve knew it wasn't about them being late. They were both on time today. "Merle's out fighting the mailboxes again," sighed Florence.

Hopper looked at the clock on the wall. "It's not even eight!"

"My guess is he started early this morning in the bars rather than the usual nine o'clock in the afternoons," Florence replied. "Which one of you wants it before he urinates on some letters and commits a federal crime?"

"I'm calling seniority on this one," Hopper cut in. "My back's still hurting from when that wannabe shoplifter tripped me into a tower of Thin Mints."

"Fine!" laughed Steve. "I'll go. I'll see you back in a bit Florence."

As Steve turned around and started to head back out the office, Florence called out, "Just remember to watch out for his kicking! His accuracy improves triple the amount when he's drunk."

Steve rolled his eyes and mentally took note, exiting the building and heading back to his car. Rounding up a town drunk was practically exciting by Hawkins' standards but Steve honestly didn't mind. This job was far more enjoyable than any desk job his father could have given him. He couldn't say for sure if he'd stick in Hawkins forever and he liked to imagine he'd move around a bit more, but he definitely couldn't argue with his life for now.

It was nice.

Billy woke with a grunt, half his hair tangled in curls and the other half flattened against his cheek. He glanced around, blinking to clear his vision as he tried to figure out what had woken him. Finally he saw Funshine, a gentle look on his face as he passed over some pastry in plastic packaging.

“Thanks,” Billy sighed, ripping it open and quickly biting down on it. He hadn’t realized until now just how hungry he was. Had he even had dinner last night? Lunch? He honestly couldn’t remember. The pastry tasted like shit, partially because of the aftertaste of alcohol still on his tongue, but he scarfed it down all the same.

“Not that we don’t appreciate all the work, but you and Mick are running yourselves thin like this.”

Billy looked away, shame quickly rising in his chest from the memory. That was why he’d been alone with his face flattened against the table and passed out from drinking too much. He’d gotten so angry at their lack of progress that he hadn’t been thinking straight. He’d said some abhorrent shit, just shouted it as loud as he could. That was why Mick wasn’t there.

He closed his eyes as the memories came back. Words escaped him. “Fuck what-what do I say? What can you—”

“It was your father talking Billy,” Funshine softly said.

“It may have been his words but it was me who was fucking talking.” Billy pushed back on the chair and stood up, his bones aching from the awkward sleeping position. “I just-fuck. He’s still there.” Billy hit the side of his head. Then harder. “He’s still there. He’s still—!”

“Hey, sit down,” Funshine interrupted, grabbing Billy and pulling him back to his chair. “That’s not helping anyone.”

“But how can I know? How!” Billy didn’t get back up simply because he knew Funshine had the strength to force him back down. He kept talking though. “I lived with him all my life! How do I know what

thoughts are his and what thoughts are mine anymore! I did so much to just fucking survive but how-how do I know I-I didn't become-become him in the-in the—”

All of this was too much. The fact that Kali was still missing and now this. He wasn't ready to talk about it, maybe he never would be. Billy started to cry, his shoulders shaking and his hands coming over his head like a protective shield. The tears hit the table as choked sobs escaped his lips. He felt Funshine place a hand on his back and rub it softly, up and down in circles.

“I got lucky with my father and mother. I know, surprising considering I ended up here, hmm? But they were good people. It was when they died and my uncle took custody of me that my life started to spiral,” Funshine said. “I did a lot of things I'm not proud of. I hurt a lot of people too and one day I sat where you are. I asked myself if I was even me anymore.

“The thing is, there's a lot of you's that exist. You're never the same you from year to year, even from month to month sometimes. You're changing and you got a lot of roads ahead of you and you can pick more than one. You've already chosen to stay and help us, even though you haven't known us as long as we've known each other. I'd say that's a step in the right direction. But the main thing to remember is that though you change and those around you influence you, you're still you. Not your father. You are you.”

Billy hiccupped, wiping at the tears and snot as Funshine just continued rubbing his back. “Didn't-didn't take you for a damn philosopher.”

A rumble of laughter escaped Funshine as he continued the motions. Billy continued to wipe at his face, trying to clear it as much as he could as he slowly started to breath more easily, going in time with Funshine's motions.

“You're ok kid. You're ok,” Funshine repeated, finally patting Billy's back and easing away.

A snort came from behind them. “Shit Funshine, you tell the kid one of your sob stories?”

Billy jolted a bit, wiping his eyes again before turning around to see Mick. She stood with her arms crossed and raised an eyebrow, clearly waiting for a response.

He had to take a moment, just breathe to get his voice under control. He was him, no one else. So what would Billy do? What should he do?

He swallowed a lot in those few seconds. He swallowed pride and other nasty words. There wasn't a reason to get defensive now. He *had* done something wrong! And he needed to own up to it.

Pushing himself to his feet, he found he couldn't quite look Mick in the eyes. If she hated him then so be it, but he couldn't deal with that knowledge just yet.

"Listen I-I shouldn't have said those things. I'm sorry and-and if there's some way I can-fuck. I don't know what to do-what you want me to do but I'm so fucking sorry and I—"

"Shit Funshine," Mick interrupted. "Why are you so good at turning people into blubbering messes?"

Funshine just let out another deep laugh and before Billy could say anything, Mick grabbed him and pulled him into a hug.

"You think you're the first person to yell shit at me like that? My skin's thick as shit," Mick replied. "Besides, I did call you a half-brained monkey who couldn't make a decision without their daddy's say, so I think we're at least a little even, yeah?"

Billy couldn't help but laugh, holding her just a little tighter before moving back.

Mick looked to the table and the empty beer bottles. "Guessing you didn't get much work done last night?"

Billy snorted. "No, you?"

"Not a lick. How have you guys been doing Funshine?"

"Axel's getting food right now. Dottie managed to track down that

man you both have been interested in—”

“Oh, Gruber yeah.” Billy quickly went around the table and found the file they had on him. “Officially retired but has worked on many projects as a consultant. The kind of tech he worked with was hella futuristic.”

“I’m still betting it was some freeze ray shit,” Mick said. “Only way I can think of them taking Kali is if she was stuck or knocked out instantly. Otherwise we would have heard some type of shit.”

“Either he’ll be able to tell us about the device and who might be using it or give us other colleagues who we can ask next,” Billy said.

“And if he’s not in the area?”

“We’ll cross that bridge when we get there,” Billy growled out. He suddenly remembered one small step of progress that they hadn’t told Funshine yet. “That one contact Kali occasionally met with finally agreed to meet with us.”

“I think it’s best Dottie goes,” Mick quickly put in. “She’s actually met the guy once before with Kali. Better for a familiar face to meet him.”

Funshine nodded gravely. “The time and place?”

“Here,” Mick said, picking up the note and handing it over to Funshine. “It’s tomorrow. Which is good because it’s already been four days and this whole missing business is just making me more antsy. Dottie already knows the area so she won’t have a problem going alone.”

“Good,” Funshine nodded. “You’ve talked to her about it.”

“A bit, though I didn’t tell her it was a definite then.” Mick scratched her forehead, closing her eyes for a moment with a frustrated sigh. “I’m still pissed that they clearly didn’t think of us as a threat.”

Billy snorted, falling back in a chair and propping his legs up on the table. “How the hell does that make sense? If they had, we wouldn’t be able to work to find her.”

“Yeah, but if they found us, it’s reasonable to assume they know what we’ve been doing. And since they took Kali, it’s also reasonable to assume they know about her powers. But that’s just it!” yelled Mick like she was suddenly having a revelation. “They probably know what we’ve been doing but they don’t care. To them, us killing off their workers is meaningless. They just wanted Kali!”

“That could mean nothing but that they’re a large, uncaring organization,” Billy tried. “I wouldn’t be surprised if we’re not the only enemies they’ve made and no offense, but we’re probably low on their radar.”

“But we’ve successfully tracked down their men! We’ve managed to wiggle our way into their world and we’ve been fucking with them for years! I mean, just because the bee buzzing in your ear doesn’t do a lot of damage, eventually it gets fucking annoying and you crush it.” Mick paused, one finger pointed and moving back and forth a few times as she gathered her words together. “But they didn’t crush us. They just left us despite how easy it would have been. Which means...that could mean what they’re doing, they’re doing fast. For them, every second counts. We’re insignificant to them not because of numbers or the people we hit but because whatever they’re doing is quick. To them, whatever we can accomplish won’t be fast enough to catch up to them.”

“That implies narcissism. A certain level of self-assuredness,” murmured Funshine. “People like that make mistakes.”

“Well whatever mistakes they make won’t matter if we don’t find Kali in time,” Mick shot back.

“If what you’re saying is true,” Billy tried, “there’s still no way to know what kind of time we’re working with. We could already be too late!”

“And if we are, we’ll track down the sons’ of bitches that hurt Kali and make them fucking pay,” Mick said. “But if they’ve ignored us cause they don’t think we can catch up then they’re fucking wrong.”

“Our contact won’t meet Dottie sooner. You know that,” Billy replied.

“Then we follow other leads. Just anything we can get our hands on,” Mick shot back. “We don’t waste a single second and once Dottie gets that information, then we’ll go after that too.”

“If this is moving as quickly as you think, there’s a chance this is occurring in the area, and they didn’t move that far,” Funshine said.

“Is it possible that we’ll get that lucky?” asked Billy.

“Possible and not completely unlikely I’d say. If we’re going by this logic, Gruber is less likely to be directly involved. He’s a few states over and we could waste time just trying to get to him,” Mick responded. She quickly rushed to the other side of the table where filing cabinets had been pulled open the night before. She continued to go through them before finding the one she was specifically looking for. She pulled it out and dropped the file down. “This guy here. Kali noted him because he’s a damn dirty politician but he seemed to be more interested in drugs rings and shit than shady government experiments. If someone wanted to do some illegal shit and do it quickly in the area though, this is how they’d remain under the radar.”

Billy spun the files towards him, flipping it open and reading some of the first words. He grinned. “Dottie can plan to meet the contact and we can knock on this guy’s door. How does that sound?”

“Good to me,” Mick replied as Funshine nodded in agreement.

“It’s so weird to think perspective didn’t exist,” muttered Lucas as Will went on his fourth art lecture that was definitely more interesting than the teachers or tours.

“Isn’t that the same with everything though?” asked Mike. “We’ll probably be just as confused by the next big thing like the artists who’d trained without perspective and felt left behind by it.”

“Huh, weird way to think about it,” muttered Dustin just as Max tugged on Mike’s sleeve.

She gestured at the nearest clock. “Look, it’s almost time for them to

call us all out to the buses for lunch. We need to get going.”

“The guard will move to the next room in one minute. Another guard will come from the stairwell at the same time,” Jane said. They’d been in that room for the last twenty minutes. The guards had a pretty constant pattern and in this room, there was always a few seconds of movement that allowed them to slip away without anyone noticing. There were security cameras but by the time people were actually after them, they’d be gone.

Max watched as one of their teachers came by, telling them it was almost time to go. Dustin put on a big smile and said, “We’ll be there!” causing Lucas to elbow him as the teacher gave them an odd look and disappeared into the next room to tell the other students.

Just then, the door to the private stairwell opened and the guard that they’d predicted came out. Jane glanced over and the door froze in place before it could close. The guard kept his back to them just as the guard that had been stationed in that room moved to the next one.

Avoiding the other people in the room, the kids stayed quiet and unnoticed, slipping through the door before Jane let it close.

“Oh cool,” whispered Lucas. “We could probably find their surveillance room back here. I wonder what kind of system they have.”

“Save it for the next trip, huh?” snorted Mike. “We need to hurry before someone actually comes after us.”

They rushed down the stairs, thankfully not coming into contact with anyone as they ran out back near what looked to be a loading dock.

“There’s a park near here. We can stop there, make sure we’re not being followed, grab a snack, and then continue on,” Mike suggested as he spun his book bag around. They started to walk off and he quickly pulled the map of the city out.

“Somehow it’s completely different. Like the city is,” Max said. “Even though we just started off on our own.”

“We’re just finally getting to see the actual city,” Will said. He looked around, both a bit awed and scared.

Max was familiar with the good and bad that came out of a city like this, even if Chicago was a far cry from the West Coast’s style. Still, it felt good to be here. Not that Hawkins didn’t have its own charm and she hadn’t grown to love it in its own way, but being here made her realize how much she missed the noise and bustle and over all excitement!

Lucas, Dustin, and Will all got sidetracked by an awesome looking comic book store-and Max would be lying if she said she wasn’t tempted too, but she, Mike, and Jane still managed to pull them away. They zigzagged through a few blocks before catching sight of the edge of the park. It wasn’t the nicest looking place and probably looked worse at night but they still found an empty bench pretty soon. They all forced themselves onto it, passing snacks back and forth and checking how much money they’d managed to get from chores and couch cushions and begging their parents.

“Hmm, twenty-two dollars and eighteen cents. Not bad,” said Lucas. “If we need something in a hurry, this could help.”

“So El, when was the last time you checked in on Kali?” asked Dustin.

“A few days ago,” she responded. “I can do it again.”

“Probably a good idea in case she moved or something. Or is out,” said Will.

Max snorted, “You make it sound like she lives in a two-story house and it’s not some abandoned building we’re aiming for.”

Will rolled his eyes while Jane closed hers. Everyone finished stuffing their faces and got up and stretched. They started to resituate some of their things, no longer worrying about hiding their tools from their teachers’ prying eyes. Max attached her walkie-talkie on the outside of her backpack for better access along with a water bottle she’d brought along. Lucas pulled his binoculars out and around his neck, and the others did similar things.

It had taken a while yet when they all looked to Jane, she was still sitting there with her eyes closed, blood dripping down her nose. Usually Jane would have wiped it away by now but she remained frozen and the blood started to drip over her lips.

“Jane,” Mike quickly said. When there was no response, he took her shoulder and shook her a bit. “Jane, what’s wrong? Jane!”

“Hey!” yelled Will, pushing Mike back. “She’ll come back when she comes back! We can’t make her.”

“But why-what’s going on? Finding people is easier than breathing for her! Why is she still—”

“Not there.”

Mike stopped talking and they all looked to Jane with wide eyes.

“You mean your sister isn’t at the abandoned building anymore?” asked Max. “Where did she go—”

“She’s not there,” Jane repeated. She looked to each of them and upon seeing they weren’t getting it, she clarified again. “She’s not anywhere.”

“You don’t think...she’s dead?”

“Lucas!” yelled Dustin.

“What! It’s a valid question! Do you have a better explanation?” yelled Lucas.

“She’s just not there,” murmured Jane.

“So what do we do?” Mike asked. “We can’t just go back. Not after all the time we put into it.”

“Her friends are there,” Jane said.

Will wrung his hands together. “Do you think they could help?”

“They won’t want to see me, but they’ll know what happened,” Jane

responded.

"Are we still headed for the same place?" asked Mike.

Jane nodded.

Mike pulled out the map again and looked around. "Alright, in that case we can cut across the park. We find this street and we keep going down until we reach here."

"Let's get going then," said Lucas. "We want to get there before it gets dark."

They started to walk through the park, the cheerfulness and feeling of independence severely lessened. No one had thought getting Jane and her sister to talk again was going to be easy, but if she was dead...or worse! What the hell would they do then? Max could already tell this was going to take longer than their day or two that they'd expected. She sent a silent apology to her mom for the worry that would come but right now Jane and her sister was more important.

No way in hell would Max go back until they knew what had happened to Kali.

Pulling their coats tighter around them as the wind picked up, they made their way down a few paths and small bridges until they got to the other side of the park. They found the street Mike had pointed out and quickly headed down the large city blocks.

They took bathroom breaks in what stores had them and found other benches to quickly claim for breaks. It was tiresome and boring and sometimes it felt like nothing was actually changing. Eventually, the safer sidewalks were gone though, and they found themselves heading down back roads or by highways, two extremes of silence and deafening noise.

The day started to darken, hours passing by as the wind picked up and the temperature dropped. Thankfully Dustin's mom had insisted he bring extra scarves if it did get colder so he passed them out, everyone quickly wrapping the crocheted monstrosities around their

necks.

During their breaks, Jane would reach out again but nothing came back. She told them a little more about Kali's friends, Funshine and Axel and Dottie and Mick and how she could see all of them. There were moments in the dark place where it seemed they were talking to someone else, a face that Jane hadn't seen and wasn't sure who it could be. She just knew it wasn't Kali.

Max wondered if they'd ever get to meet Jane's sister or if the girl's friends would tell them the worst had happened and that was it.

Will kept them informed of the time as the sun finally dipped below the sky line and twilight was upon them, the dark purples and blues slowly turning black overhead. It was nearing six when they made it to the area that Jane knew they were in and from there, they followed her instead of the map. There weren't many people here and the few that they passed looked homeless. The group stayed close together, hands grabbing each other when someone strayed to close or gave them a look that had everyone getting behind El.

Eventually Jane froze though, hesitating for a second before finally pointing away. "There. That's where they are."

It was an old factory, the parking lot cracked and partially taken over by grass again. There was machinery outside it, old and rusting, but from where they were standing it did look like there was a light on in one of the upper windows.

The teens made their way across, Jane leading the way and finally wrenching open a locked door. They piled in behind her, looking around the empty room with curious glances just as a gun cocked.

In an apartment complex not far from the University of Chicago, Nancy Wheeler was busy writing the final lines of a paper. To anyone walking up to her, the room looked how any young woman's apartment should. Though perhaps a bit more spacious thanks to her parent's money, it was still small and held everything that Nancy needed.

When she'd moved up during the summer, Jonathan had come with her. Everything that they'd put up together remained and the place had barely changed in the past few months. To the left was the small kitchen that Nancy kept packed. She sat at her desk that was right in front of the main windows so that she could utilize the natural light, and off to the right was the door to her bedroom.

It was clean and well kept and looked exactly as it should.

However, if a person standing over Nancy decided to turn around, they would have discovered two things. One was the small loveseat and coffee table set that had only been used once, dust clearly having gathered since the past months. The other was the wall that looked like it belonged more in the basement of some conspirator rather than a college girl's room.

It mostly consisted of newspaper clippings and little, scrawled notes. They were arranged in four neat columns with six different colors of string connecting different points. There were a few grainy photos that were up there as well, all courtesy of the camera that Jonathan had gotten her as a graduation present.

For the moment, Nancy was more focused on school work though, at least until her eyes glanced at the clock on the wall. A muffled "shit" fell from her mouth along with the pencil that had been placed there. As it clattered to the desk, Nancy jumped up and grabbed the small briefcase for work. Snapping it open, she carefully placed two prepared files into it.

She turned around to get dressed but upon glancing at the clock again, she decided to roll with her still frizzy hair stuck in its ponytail and her casual clothes. Most of the people at work didn't dress so nicely anyways and by this point, Nancy was hoping she'd garnered enough respect to be able to get away with the look.

Though she had chosen the university for their writing programs, it hadn't originally been her intention to join the Chicago Sun-Times nor to focus on journalism. However, after several discussions with teachers, the word of an internship at the Sun, and the wall of clippings and string had started to form, Nancy had realized that perhaps reporting was for her. The internship wasn't anything

serious. She was only one of their tens of editors, but by accepting the offer she'd been able to utilize their resources for her private project as well.

If Murray had seen, he probably would have cracked a joke and told her she was hooked. Jonathan...well she hadn't told Jonathan yet. On the chance that she was on to something, she didn't want him to worry and she didn't want him to feel a need to drop everything and come to her aid.

So for the moment, Nancy was going solo though she hoped to change that soon.

Quickly locking her door, she rushed out of the apartment building and down to her car. She threw her briefcase into the side and eased into traffic.

The drive wasn't long. Everything Nancy needed was practically right around the corner from where she lived. Despite living there for nearly six months, she hadn't seen much of the city. It was always to and from school, to and from work, and occasionally ending up at a grocery store or Wal-Mart. She'd been to the city council now and then for her private project but it was nearby too. She mentally reminded herself that she needed to reach out more if she wanted to truly become comfortable with the city.

Managing to make it to work with three minutes to spare, Nancy rushed to her boss's office, struggling to get the files out as she came in.

"Wheeler," Mr. Salerno said. "You finish looking over the adverts?"

"Yes sir. I corrected a misspelling in the personals but otherwise it's good to go," she replied as she set one file on the desk.

Salerno eyed the other folder in her hand, quickly taking note of her hopeful expression. "Don't tell me you pulled some overtime and took over Harold's. I told you no matter how many times he begs, his work is on—"

"No sir. It's actually about *Gibson & King*." Though Nancy was

hopeful, she was also practical, and the tired look that passed Salerno's face wasn't surprising.

"I thought it was just *Gibson Inc.* last time," Salerno carefully said.

"They changed. But they're the same people who bought up the land ten miles outside of town! See, I managed to get this from city hall..." Nancy paused as she quickly grabbed that copy and set it down. "And here are the building plans. The thing is that these plans weren't the same ones that I got from the studio that I talked to an—"

"I appreciate the enthusiasm, but what have you really got?" sighed Salerno. "You've got a new company that's buying up some land and making a building. Fine! It's not like it's a crime. If anything, that's the American dream in progress."

"But there's no record of this company! I tried getting an interview with the owners and was denied and when I tried looking for their names in any and all records, nothing came up. It—"

"Nancy," Salerno suddenly interrupted. He looked just as tired but there was a fondness now. "I know you know Murray and I know you helped with leaking that information about chemical leaks or whatever in nowhere town Indiana."

"You-you do?" She shouldn't have been too surprised. She knew Murray had worked at the Sun-Times before getting fired and going into the private sector. However, Nancy had never brought up his name and from the way Salerno was talking, it was like he knew the man.

"We worked for about a year together," Salerno explained. "He's a...a good acquaintance, and sometimes we help each other out with leads and the like. Now, don't get me wrong. Murray can be useful and you both did a great job with whatever town—"

"Hawkins."

"Right, Hawkins. But that was just one good one in the mountains of nonsense Murray believes in. A chemical spill is by far one of his tamer outcomes and one of the few that he's proven," Salerno said.

"He could have been a great reporter but he chose crackpot theories over a paying job. I don't want to see you go down the same path."

Nancy let out a tired sigh. She could already tell she was losing this but she had to at least ask something. "How did you know I helped?"

"Well I was one of the authors on that article for the event thanks to Murray. He was our main informant for it and off handedly commented there were some locals that helped. I talked to him again about three months ago. It didn't click right away but I went through the recent applications again looking for past residences and the like. Noting you were from Hawkins I assumed it, but all this—" Salerno paused to gesture at her documents. "That's been the final nail in the coffin. He rub off on you. Hmm?"

Nancy shifted back and forth. She felt somewhat irritated, both that she'd been read so easily but also that Salerno didn't believe her. Alright, so she didn't know how credible Murray's other theories were. Knowing that it hadn't been a damn chemical spillage made her trust his judgment a lot more though. Salerno may have been her senior but he had no idea what he was talking about.

"Whatever influence Murray might have had, it doesn't change the fact that—"

"That what? A new company has been formed and is starting up? Nancy, if you can find me something, laundering, mob connections, anything, then I will welcome you bringing it to me again. I like that you're passionate. I do! But I can't waste time on something that's just theories," Salerno replied. "You're new to the game and you need facts to stay in it. Understood?"

Nancy resisted the urge to argue, roll her eyes, to show any sign of retaliation. It was days like this where she was forced to remember that most people still lived in the normal world. They hadn't spent the better part of their high school years dealing with crushing guilt and fighting for justice for their best friend's death. They didn't have to live with the fact that they weren't alone, nor that their universe was the only one. El had closed the Upside Down but it was still there, like on the other side of the mirror. What else was out there? What else might one day find its way to Earth?

“Nancy, you understand me?”

“Yes sir,” she mumbled, finally breaking through the noise of her mind.

“Good, I’m glad to hear it. Your work for the day is at your desk.” Salerno picked up the file from her last assignment and turned to his computer, apparently done with her for the time being.

Nancy left his office, practically wading through the sea of cubicles before she found hers. Plopping down in her seat, she almost thought to just throw the file in the trash. What did she really have? Some shady dealings sure, but nothing concrete was there. Why was it holding onto her so tightly?

Perhaps it was just the area. It wasn’t Hawkins but it was close and she’d already researched the empty spaces where new secret facilities could easily be constructed out of the public’s eyes. It didn’t matter that so many had been killed with the coming of the Mind Flayer, that Dr. Owens had assured them they had no interest in continuing the research, or that the government had left the area. What the government had discovered was something that they wouldn’t let go of. That, Nancy was sure of.

So the question was just where would they have moved?

There was the chance that they’d left the east coast entirely or even the country, but what documents Nancy had found told her something dirty was going on. The changing plans, the lack of records and faces for the men supposedly in charge, the fact that she still couldn’t figure out what *Gibson & King* did, there was something there. There had to be!

The thought pushed Nancy to place the file back in her briefcase instead. Maybe she should finally go out to the building site. She’d been putting it off, not wanting to get in over her head. If Salerno wanted actual evidence, then she’d have to get her hands dirty one way or another, right? And she still didn’t have deep enough connections or knowledge about the city government of Chicago. She’d already exhausted all those resources.

Tonight perhaps? Let's see, she'd already finished the essay that was due and there weren't any more tests between now and midterms... tonight then. She would uncover the answers whether she'd like them or not.

Steve had been nice enough to hold down the office while Jim waited outside the school. It was close to six thirty and he stood by Joyce. They spoke casually, talking about the holidays and their plans for Christmas. After a horrendous attempt at dinner last year, Jim had ended up on Joyce's doorsteps with a hungry kid next to him.

"We don't really have a Chinese restaurant in town to pull a cliché. You got room for two more?" That had been Jim's opening line and somehow Joyce had still said yes.

This time, Joyce told him he didn't have to worry about burning Christmas dinner. He was getting an invitation ahead of time. They talked the plan over and Joyce also gave him some good advice for gifts as well. Last year Jim had fallen on new clothes which Jane had still loved. Granted, he could have just gotten her a box of Eggo waffles and Jane would have been thrilled. But this year he wanted to get something extra special and he had been out of the parent game for a while and he trusted Joyce's opinion above all else.

As they continued to talk, more parents showed up, and the empty parking lot began filling up despite the dark school. The sky was completely black with the stars showing as the buses finally rolled up. Jim breathed a sigh of relief, always a little anxious whenever he and Jane tried something new. This had definitely been a big step on the list of experiences Jim wanted her to have. He hoped it had gone well and was already looking forward to the stories she had. However, as they stopped, Jim couldn't help but frown.

"Hop, you've got that look on your face," Joyce murmured.

"It's—"

"Don't tell me it's nothing when it involves the kids," interrupted Joyce. She looked between the buses and Jim. "Tell me."

"I just...I thought there was one more bus this morning. I thought..." as the doors opened up and kids rushed out, Jim quickly walked forward. Most of the parents waited by running cars but Joyce followed closely behind. Jim's eyes rapidly scanned the crowd, not just for Jane but any of the kids. He didn't see a single one as he parted the sea of students and rounded on a teacher. The look on her face already told Jim this wasn't good.

He went with his instincts. "Where is the other bus?"

"They-they're about thirty minutes behind us. Chief the children-I don't know how it happened but-but they had to stop and talk to the police as soon as possible but we couldn't leave all those kids behind and-and you have to understand we are doing—"

Jim didn't bother listening to her. He looked around, noticing how Mrs. Henderson and the Wheelers and the Sinclairs and Mrs. Hargrove were all starting to realize their children weren't coming off. No Will jumped down those steps and came running towards them.

He grabbed Joyce's hand, pulling her away from the buses and the parents and kids.

"Jim, what is going on? What happened to the children?" asked Joyce, her eyes wide and her voice rising with each syllable.

Jim didn't respond right away. He hit his car with an angry shove, a growl escaping his throat. A light went off in his head and he suddenly yelled, "I'm such an idiot!"

Joyce jumped back. "Hopper if you do not tell me this instant—"

"Jane! Jane with her big puppy dog eyes and her begging about not wanting to be left out of the field trip—"

"Tell me Hop!!!"

"Her sister! Jane has a sister in Chicago!"

"But-I thought her mom—"

"Not like that. She was part of the program, the eighth one. El found her after our fight, while I was stuck in the Lab with you and Will and Mike," Hopper said. "Things went south and Jane told me she was pretty sure they'd left the city. I told her a few months ago that if she ever wanted to go looking for her, I'd help. She said she wasn't ready then but apparently she's ready now and she got all the kids in on her plan too."

"So-so her sister moved back to Chicago-or never left but-but do you know where she might be there? Do you know where the kids are?" asked Joyce.

"Last time Jane told me she was shacked up in an abandoned warehouse with her friends. I imagine the choice of home hasn't changed," said Jim.

"Alright-alright that's better than nothing," Joyce murmured, clearly forcing herself to remain calm. "So what should we do now?"

"Assuming this is just El trying to find her sister and nothing more, I'd still argue we need to find the kids first. From what I was told about Kali, her and her friends aren't much loved by the law and a confrontation could get messy. And if it's more than just Jane wanting to find her sister..."

Joyce nodded in understanding. "Meet me at my house. I'll be ready to go by the time you get there."

"Ok. I'll meet you there soon. I'm going to go talk to Steve first."

Jim quickly got into his car and drove off as Joyce ran to hers. For the moment, he couldn't think about the other parents or what they were feeling. Focusing on Jane meant finding the others anyways. He drove straight to the station, running inside without turning off his engine. As he rushed through the front door, Jim literally knocked heads with Steve.

"Shit! Christ—"

"Hopper! The kids—"

"I know. How do you know?!"

“Me?! We just got the call from the CPD. What about you?!” Steve cried out.

“The buses just arrived, and the teachers told me all I needed to hear,” Jim said. He glanced around at the scrambling department. It may not have happened in their town but six missing kids was something to worry about. Bypassing Florence, Jim pulled Steve into his office and closed the door. “Listen, El has a sister, somebody who was at the Lab with her. She met her before in Chicago, and my guess is that she went to find her again. One way or another, the kids tagged along. It’s not too surprising, but don’t worry. Joyce and I are going to go find them.”

“And you’re telling me because...”

“Because if something happens, then I need to know that you’ll have our backs.”

Steve gulped, suddenly realizing how much responsibility was starting to rest on his shoulders.

“If it looks like we’re going to stay a few days, I’ll call you and give you a number you can reach us at,” Jim replied. “Right now, I need you to keep this office running and to try and keep everyone calm. Can you do that?”

“Y-yes. Yes I can!”

“Good. Remember that. Try to keep things normal for as long as possible. If we need you though, I’ll call. You can trust me on that.”

Steve nodded. “What about Nancy? I mean, she’s already there—”

“Hopefully this will end quickly with the kids safe and back here but I am going to call her before I leave. You stay here for now. Try and keep everyone as calm as you can.”

“That’s an easier thing said than done.”

“Why do you think I’m leaving it to you?” snorted Jim. He clapped Steve on his shoulder and quickly left, again dodging Florence before anyone could grab him for questioning.

He went home and changed into civilian clothes. He holstered his gun again before heading to a floorboard and moving it from the ground. He pulled out the box underneath along with a bag of guns from the time at the Lab. He didn't take all of them, but hopefully more than he'd need either way. Inside the box was cash that would help them stay off the radar if needed along with a walkie-talkie that could match the same wave lengths as the ones the kids had. Jim had promised that he'd only use it in emergencies. Sadly, today seemed to be that day.

He put the extra things in a bag that he threw over his shoulder before going to the phone. He dialed Nancy's number, the line ringing until the answering machine picked up. Thank god her dad had bought that for her.

"Nancy, it's the Chief. The kids are missing in Chicago, trying to find Jane's sister. Joyce and I are coming to help track them down. We'll tell you more when we get there."

Jim hung up and rushed back out to his truck before heading to Joyce's. She was already outside waiting. As Joyce got in, she noted the bag in the back and hesitantly asked, "Do you think we'll need all that? We're trying to find our missing kids, not laying siege to something."

"If we lived normal lives, I'd agree with you," sighed Jim. "But better to be over prepared than under. Right?"

Joyce gave a reluctant nod as Jim quickly drove back down her driveway. It was going to be a long two hour drive into the night.

Kali woke, exhausted and in pain but not broken. She'd escaped places like this once. She could do it again. She got off the small, white bed, feeling the heavy metal of the collar shift around her neck. For the fourth day in a row, she poked and prodded it but there was still nothing that gave way or seemed to signal a way to open it. There felt to be a place to put a key somewhere on the back but with nothing hard to pick it with or the key itself, that information was useless. She'd tried breaking the thing as well, destroying whatever little machine was humming away inside but the metal wouldn't give.

Even after realizing the connection between the collar and her powers, she'd continued to try so many times. Blood would drip down her nose but no matter how hard she concentrated, the men and women that came in and out weren't affected. They didn't see or feel anything and neither could Kali get a read off them.

Her powers weren't just gone. She could still feel them even if she couldn't reach out and touch people with them anymore. This collar thing, and maybe something else working with it, was blocking her. So far nothing she did was able to break the hold, physically or mentally. It didn't deter her though. Either she'd find a way or she'd simply have to go a more natural route.

Just out right fighting wouldn't help. Not yet, no matter how badly she wanted to punch and kick and break every bone in the doctors and scientists and guards bodies. She needed an actual plan and slowly, that plan was forming.

Right now, she ate the shit food they'd given her. She was careful to note any adverse side effects, never eating enough to cause any serious reactions if there were drugs in them. If there were, she doubted they were what was stopping her powers. The collar definitely had to be more than a fancy security defense.

Besides, if she didn't eat, she'd probably just be forced to eat and if she was going to have to use her fists and feet to break out, she'd need her strength.

While she was carefully picking through her food, a knock sounded on her door before it opened. Most just walked in, not caring about her state or what she was doing. The knock didn't really ease Kali though. Politeness was usually just a mask that these people thought was an easy way to get to you. Besides, Kali had experience with the polite ones. They were usually the crueler ones anyways. They were just better at hiding it.

A man walked in with a cane in one hand, files in another, and a lab coat on his shoulders. Kali didn't pay attention to the kind, almost grandfatherly face, or the bright smiles and eyes. Even if this man was just somehow this cheerful in reality, even if he didn't know the full extent of what he was doing and was just blissfully unaware, it

didn't matter. Everyone here was an enemy.

"Kali Prasad, I've been told you haven't gotten along with your other physician. I've been assigned to your case in the hopes that we might come to a better understanding."

The man smiled but again Kali ignored it. Whatever lie he was trying to sell, she wasn't going to buy. She did admit that using her name and not just her number or label was creative and more than the other doctors had tried but she still wouldn't fall for it.

"I'm Dr. Sam Owens. It's nice to meet you."

3. Chapter 2: Clash of the Siblings

Notes for the Chapter:

Thank you again for all the lovely kudos and comments! I wish with this story I had a more concrete updating schedule but school is probably just not going to make that happen. Apologies about that and thank you for your patience.

This chapter was a roller coaster of emotion and I think you'll understand why I decided to wait one more chapter for Billy and Max's reunion. Anyways, here it is and I hope you enjoy! Thank you <3

It was late when Hopper and Joyce arrived in Chicago, snow falling and quickly covering the city. It wasn't too late to visit Nancy though granted, it could have been three in the morning and they probably would have gone knocking on her door. Though she'd probably be as confused as them with nothing but their message to go off of, there was always a chance she'd seen or heard something around town.

Despite Jim's over prepared nature, it was pure luck that Joyce had remembered Nancy's address. They managed to find her apartment building as it neared nine o'clock.

"Was it 302 or 304?" asked Jim.

"Two," replied Joyce as they finished booking it up the stairs and headed down a long hall. Jim knocked twice, as hard as he could, and called Nancy's name once but no one answered.

"She is in college," Joyce sighed. "There's a chance she's out."

Jim rubbed his eyes, trying to decide his next course of action. Though he knew the likely areas that Jane's sister was inhabiting, he didn't have a location and the search would take all night, probably closer to days what with all the nooks and crannies that Chicago held. But if there was even a small chance that Mike had talked to his sister or something of that nature...

With a final action, Jim finally tried the doorknob. He expected it to remain firmly still, proving Joyce's assumption, but instead it turned and the door opened just a crack. He drew his service weapon immediately, stepping in front of Joyce and leading the way into the room.

Please just be a misunderstanding, thought Jim. A mistake on Nancy's part. It was just an unlocked door and nothing more.

But as the door fully swung open and Jim covered the area, he saw that it was far from a simple act of forgetfulness. Joyce opened her mouth but Jim quickly put a finger to his lip. There was no telling what kind of bugs could be hiding in the room. One look around and Jim could tell this wasn't a simple robbery. It meant the people responsible had likely been casing the place and bugs were possible. Still, though he was betting professional considering the thoroughness, the job was also messy. This had been quick, in and out. Perhaps they'd been interrupted? Or just in a hurry?

Using the hem of his shirt, he flicked the lights on. The little kitchen area had pots and pans and all sorts of utensils scattered about, cabinets wide open and draws emptied. The couch was torn up. The stuffing added to the mess of the room but one quick look and Jim could tell it hadn't been to just cause chaos. They'd been looking for something.

The desk was similar to the kitchen and as they slowly went through the mess and started to look closer, Joyce pulled him back and pointed to one of the walls. There was an area that hadn't been bleached by the sun, the outline faint but there. It was too large to be a picture. Some type of board had been there.

The phone was off the hook on the desk. It could have been another, insignificant addition to the mess but it was different. The phone hadn't been pulled off the hook, forced open, anything like that. It was just off the hook. Had Nancy been here, in the middle of a phone call? Had they taken her too?

They pushed farther, heading into the bedroom. The state of it only furthered Jim's belief that it hadn't been a robbery. Nothing of value had been taken and from what he could tell, all belongings that

should belong in a young woman's room were still there.

Other than what was implied though, there was no hint of what had exactly gone down. There was no blood which was a good sign but where was Nancy?

Once done looking over the bedroom and taking a quick glance in the bathroom, Jim was ready to leave, but Joyce tapped him on the shoulder and pulled him back to the closet. Like the rest of the place, it had been emptied out. Perhaps a bit small but otherwise there seemed to be nothing unusual about it.

Joyce gestured for Jim's flashlight as the closet wasn't really big enough to have a light of its own. Handing it over, she quickly shined it into the corners and Jim immediately spotted what she must have discovered.

The latch was small and crudely made. Joyce pulled it and a panel fell down, revealing that the closet was almost twice as big. Shining her light in, there wasn't anything there but gathering dust and a box. Jim reached down and pulled it out, throwing off the lid to reveal several papers, photos, a container of undeveloped film, and a gun.

Billy sat at the table eating dinner as they planned out the next day and talked about what information they had. That afternoon Mick and Axel had tracked down their politician and scouted his home and office, figuring out the best time to corner him. A noise from the front of the building had them all freezing though. They didn't have Kali to make them disappear.

One thought ran through their minds, the idea that maybe they were about to get finished off. But if that was the case, then why didn't they use whatever tech they'd used to take Kali? Whoever they were, they needed the upper hand. Grabbing their guns, they slowly made their way out of the room. Splitting up, they moved around and towards where the noise had come from, careful not to make a single sound.

Billy could tell Funshine and Dottie had come into contact though by

Dottie suddenly shouting, “Holy shit! You!”

Billy didn’t know who they could be talking about but he followed behind Axel and Mick as they quickly came out from cover.

Axel’s gun immediately dropped as he put his hands on his hips. “Well if it isn’t fucking Shirley Temple-fuck! What the hell Billy!”

Shoving Axel to the side and stepping in front of them, Billy couldn’t help but drop his mouth. “Maxine!”

“Billy!?”

God, it was her! And-holy shit it was her twerp friend group. It took a moment to recognize them, all having grown taller and with less baby fat around their cheeks. But no, each one of them was definitely there from the Sinclair kid to Byers’ younger brother plus some curly haired stranger.

“What the fuck are you doing here?!” Billy yelled. He threw up his hands and took a step closer.

Max did a similar thing. “Me? What about you!!! You left!!!”

“Yeah, I did! Are we in little shithole Hawkins? No? Didn’t think so!”

“Why are you with them!?”

“How do you know them!”

“What about how do you know her?!” yelled Axel, pointing from Max to Jane.

“Who cares about that? The coward fucking abandoned us!” Dottie yelled, waving her own gun about.

Mike pushed forward. “Don’t talk to her like that!”

“Yeah, she’ll kick your ass!” yelled Dustin.

“Oh really? She couldn’t even pull the trigger last time!” Axel shouted.

At the same time, Max and Billy continued to yell at each other, both groups in each other's faces, the shouting bouncing off the walls with curses and threats and—

“Quiet!”

They all stopped, Funshine finally speaking up and the only one who hadn't been trying to shout his lungs out. He stepped towards Jane and despite how Mike and Lucas immediately got in front of her, Jane easily stepped between them. Funshine held out his hand and Jane took it, a small smile finally forming on her lips. “Ms. Jane, after the way we left things, I'm glad to see you're alright.”

Jane nodded in agreement as their hands parted.

Funshine crossed his arms and glared at Axel and Dottie mainly. “Really, threatening children. What would Ms. Kali think of that?”

“She left us in the middle of a shootout! Or do you not remember that?” asked Dottie.

“Wait, shootout!” cried Will.

“El, you didn't tell us that!” Dustin quickly said.

“Wasn't important,” Jane replied, eyes still focused on Funshine.

“Not important? Of course it was!” Mike shouted. “And it would have helped to know Billy was here!”

“How could she? She never actually met him,” Lucas replied, shoving Mike in the shoulder.

Lucas was right in that Jane had never even seen Billy but she did know about him from Max. Because of that, with one look she twisted the muscles in his arm. It was harder to concentrate on something small like that rather than the simple action of breaking a bone. However, the need to make a point had Jane acting anyway. She just didn't go farther because she didn't want to escalate things. However, in her mind he definitely deserved something.

Billy yelped, grabbing at his arm as the bruise blossomed underneath.

“What the hell! What the fuck did you do to my arm!?”

As Billy moved forward, so did Axel and Mick, though whether to stop him or egg him on, it was impossible to say. At the same time, Mike and everyone else quickly formed a protective circle around Jane. Before blows could be made on any side though, Jane’s voice broke through. It wasn’t a shout but it had everyone freezing. “Where is my sister? Where is Kali?”

The kids looked at the other group, hoping for some kind of answer. Funshine and the others looked at each other, having no idea what to say.

Billy still stepped forward, the kids instinctively tensing up, but his posture was already different from the anger that had been bleeding off him only seconds ago. His voice was soft, possibly the softest Max had ever heard. “You were at the Lab with her,” Billy murmured.

Jane looked him over, a frown of her own forming. She didn’t know him, but already he was differing from Max’s version. She nodded.

“I’m sorry. I’m sorry for what they did to you,” Billy murmured.

It took a moment for Jane to respond. She had a feeling that Billy understood. Not like how Kali understood but better than Mike in an odd way. “Thank you,” she whispered.

Just as she did though, Max shot forward again. “How do you know about the Lab!?”

“Because Kali told me! How do you—”

“Because I was there! You have no idea what’s going on!”

“Me! You’re fourteen!”

“Fifteen and I fought off Demodogs!”

“Don’t make up words!”

“I’m not making up words—”

“Stop fighting!” Jane yelled. Metal creaked around them, a reminder of what she was capable of. “Funshine, what happened?”

“I think we all have questions that need answering,” sighed Funshine. “So, instead of yelling accusations, let’s sit down and talk like adults. I’m assuming these are some of your friends Ms. Jane.”

She nodded.

“A pleasure to meet you. I’m Funshine, this is Dottie, Axel, Mick, and you seem to know Billy.”

Funshine then waited and it took a moment before the kids started to round off as well. Funshine nodded his thanks and then the group slowly made their way back to where they’d been eating. Mick and Funshine grabbed some extra chairs and things, the kids’ eyes quickly moving around the area and focusing on all the files and pictures and documents that were strewn about.

“Billy...what the hell are you involved in?” Max whispered. The fact that she didn’t get pissed when Billy didn’t speak up showed that she wasn’t really expecting an answer. She was in shock, trying to figure out how the hell this had happened and to fill in the blanks that Jane hadn’t filled herself.

“Are you hungry?” asked Funshine.

“Hey!” Axel yelled. “I wasted my time getting this shit! I’m not—”

Funshine shot him a glare but the kids quickly said they were alright except for Dustin who pulled out six chocolate bars and started eating them anyways.

“Where is Kali?” repeated Jane now that everyone was situated.

“No,” growled Axel. “You don’t get—”

“We’ll answer it first,” interrupted Funshine. He let out a deep sigh and focused on Jane. “She was taken. We’re not sure who by.”

“Our running theory is they’re somehow connected with the people at that Lab but we’re not sure how,” Mick added.

"Didn't you say she can like, make people see stuff?" asked Lucas.
"How could they take her?"

"There was like a damn jump or something," Axel growled. "One moment there, the next gone. Funshine was actually there to see it happen."

"It was like my heart stopped," Billy whispered, shivering at the memory. He avoided looking at the kids though, except for Jane. She was easier to pay attention to because he didn't know her but all the others...too many conflicting emotions were wrapped up in him.

Max noticed the shiver and she tried to figure out if it was genuine fear or because he was just new to this science and supernatural nightmare. It was an odd reaction though, granted all of his reactions had been odd so far. Max was used to the anger. Not all...this.

"So why are you here?" asked Dottie. "Why now? It's pretty damn suspicious."

"I've been watching," Jane replied.

"What! You little freak—"

"I wanted to know you were safe," Jane continued, cutting off Axel with a glare. "I only looked enough to know who was alive. But then...I thought I could help her. I thought maybe I could help you now but...we were on our way and I looked once more and she was...gone."

"She's dead?" Billy asked, his voice unintentionally breaking. Had they really failed to save her?

Max only became more confused. And still more emotions popped up other than anger. When they'd moved to Hawkins, that emotion had only strengthened until he'd left in an explosion. But now...he looked scared, maybe even heartbroken. It didn't feel right and just as Billy kept looking at the table, Max found she had to do the same.

"I don't think so. I think...it just doesn't feel like that," Jane admitted. "But I can't find her. It's like something's blocking me."

“So there’s still hope,” Mick sighed.

“Ms. Jane, you were at the Lab longer. You told us that Dr. Brenner was dead. Perhaps you know who else could be behind this,” Funshine said.

“Those people were killed...or removed,” Jane slowly murmured. “A new group came in. Different. And the same. They were killed or removed too.”

“You killed them?” scoffed Axel. “That’s rich coming from you—”

“I kept my friends safe! I had to!” Jane interrupted, new found anger building in her. In the silence that followed, she slowly got a hold of herself though and finished, “I didn’t kill them all. The Demogorgon or Demodogs got most.”

“Ok what the hell is that?” asked Mick. “You keep spouting out those words but I have no idea what they mean.”

“It’s D&D,” Will instinctively said which had Lucas rolling his eyes.

“Their analogies,” Mike amended.

“You didn’t tell us much of your past,” Funshine calmly said. “You mentioned Brenner’s death and your friends but not much else. What happened to you when you left the Lab?”

Now the kids felt like they could really talk. The original four started to describe how Will went missing and what happened when they found Jane, and Max joined in when they got to the second year of shit going down. She kept casting glances in Billy’s direction, watching the shock and anger building up. He was clearly asking how he couldn’t have known all this shit was going down and when they got near the end of the whole story, Billy finally said, “That night-it’s a fucking blur but-but you fucking drugged me and jumped down some inter-dimensional portal!”

“It was more like tunnels,” Lucas tried.

“Or even the insides of the Mindflayer,” Dustin added.

“That’s disgusting,” grumbled Mike.

“But kind of accurate,” Will replied.

“You’re fucking lying,” Dottie cut in.

“Why would we lie!?” yelled Jane.

“I don’t know but no way that’s all true!” Axel shot back.

“El can move things with her mind!” Mike responded. “Why is this so hard to believe!?”

“You’re talking about aliens. Fucking aliens!” Mick said. She ran a hand down her face, clearly tired and having no idea what the hell to believe anymore. “You’re literally answering the question of we’re not alone in the universe and you expect us to just believe it?”

“It’s true!” Jane yelled. “I opened and closed the gate! It’s real!”

Funshine held up his hands to keep everyone at bay before more shouting could occur. “We went on a leap of faith with Ms. Kali.”

“But she showed us proof,” Axel replied. “What proof do we have from her?”

“They’re sisters by their shared experiences,” Funshine shot back. “Ms. Jane was there far longer than Kali though. If these men and women can make a little girl bend things with her mind, then who’s to say they can’t do more? We still don’t know what they used to take Kali and though Ms. Jane can’t find her now, maybe she will down the line, or she can at least help us in her search, but I for one think we should believe her.”

Max was starting to like Funshine more and more. He seemed the most reasonable out of the group and clearly being the oldest definitely gave him some added credibility too. Mick and Dottie looked like they were coming around, though Axel was clearly too angry about all this and didn’t believe them still. Billy...she forced herself to look at him and saw that he wasn’t even there, not mentally anyways. With his fists clenched and covering his mouth, he was probably running through all the little things that had happened

that past fall, the things that never quite made since.

Axel kept arguing, Dottie and Mick somewhat going back and forth on this as Funshine turned to silence again. Billy eventually spoke again, the sudden presence of his voice making everyone quiet as they looked to him. He was shocked by the words that were coming out of his mouth but they were the truth. He couldn't not believe the kids. Too many unanswered questions lay before him and if their knowledge of this Upside Down place and the lab meant they got a lead on Kali...

"So you're willing to help us find Kali?" Billy murmured.

Jane nodded.

"That's good to hear. We need it."

Axel grabbed Billy's shoulder. "Hold on Curly—"

"Curly?" snorted Dustin.

Billy shot the kid a glare before he could say more as Axel kept talking. "Are you seriously saying you believe her?"

"Why not?" Billy sighed. He was tired of this arguing and fighting. He'd already done that with Mick and had wasted time pulling himself out of the hole that he'd dug. He didn't want to dig another one and risk wasting more time. It had been easy letting anger and confusion just take him when he didn't have anything he was really fighting for but now... "We've already got shadow organizations and government conspiracies and kids with powers so just why the fuck not? The more we argue, the longer it's going to take us to find Kali."

"Listen, I'll admit there's got to be some truth to what they're saying," Mick slowly said, "but you're suggesting these kids actually help us."

"We're teenagers," Mike shot back but Billy ignored him.

"If her connection from Kali is being blocked, maybe she'll figure out a way around it or the thing will let up or something like Funshine said, but either way she could help us find her. Maybe the Upside

Down is involved this time, maybe not, but they've got information we don't. We need it and I doubt the rest of them are just going to leave Jane with us.”

“You're god damn right,” growled Lucas.

Billy averted his eyes from the memory of what he'd done and focused on his friends. He silently pleaded with them to see reason, Funshine of course already nodding in agreement. Slowly, Mick and Dottie did the same until they were all left staring at Axel who just threw his hands up in the air and growled out, “Fine! But you weren't there when she fucking abandoned us Curly. Watch your back.”

The kids looked ready to go up in arms at the way Axel was talking about Jane but Billy sighed in relief as Funshine interrupted again.

“You said Dr. Sam Owens ran the new organization, that he survived. Do you think he could be involved?”

“The others were willing to just kill me,” Will quickly said, his small hands clenched into tight fists. “But he helped me. He helped Jane get a new life.”

“He was still working for them,” Axel spit out. “If he helped you, it was only because he thought he could benefit from it.”

Will looked down, clearly not wanting to believe that.

“Well how about you find him,” Dottie said to Jane. “You're good at that.”

“That's not a bad idea,” Max said. “We can prove or disprove he's involved and that's it.”

Mike looked to Jane, a silent question, a moment of support, and after Jane nodded she stood up and moved away. “It shouldn't take long.”

They all waited in silence, some of them bouncing their feet up and down in anticipation. The kids didn't really think Dr. Owens was involved. Why would he be? It just didn't make sense. Of course, Axel and the others weren't so sure as they waited for the bad news to

come.

Seconds ticked by and Jane still didn't open her eyes. Doubt started to slip into some of their minds and when over a minute passed, Will whispered a small, "Please no," under his breath.

Still she sat and still they waited until she was suddenly up in anger and wiping the blood away.

"Gone."

"So that damn bastard is with Kali!" growled Axel.

Max gently took Jane's hand and pulled her back to her seat. "Did it feel the same?"

Jane nodded. "I couldn't find him. I'm still blocked."

"Damn it," Mick muttered. "If only we knew where this guy lived or something."

"Maybe he's in one of the files," Dottie quickly said. "We just don't know his name."

That brought a newfound purpose to the group though all the kids were severely dampened by the news. Why would he do it? He'd been helping the Chief after all! Why would he go back on his word? Why would he start following a path like the previous administration, like Dr. Brenner? None of them had answers so they simply helped in looking through the pictures that they had.

Max couldn't help but be impressed with all that the group had. She kept getting distracted, her eyes scanning facts and figures that told far more than Jane had ever told them. Though the Lab had been at the center of it all when Dr. Brenner was in charge, it appeared there was far more history behind the project and even with both catastrophes, the project wasn't fully dead.

There were mentions of the new leader of the USSR, a name Max had no idea how to pronounce, and more mentions of a costly arms race. From what Max could tell, these people wanted to pull the US so far ahead of the USSR that the communist country would never pose a

threat again. Talks of children soldiers, of tapping into the power of the Upside Down and using it for weapons and bombs, it was horrifying.

A lot of the groups and sub-organizations seemed to have been broken up already despite the need for action that some scientists had pushed forward. The public US government seemed to have denied further research again and again after what happened in the late fall of 1984. However, despite how extensive the notes were, there was no mention of Dr. Owens and very little about the second administration at the Lab before being permanently shut down. If Kali's group didn't have that kind of information, what else were they missing?

The energy fizzled out of the room as everyone sat back, tired and again seemingly back at square one.

Max quickly spoke up though, recalling how much their group had explained themselves but not Kali's. "Maybe Dr. Owens didn't pan out, but what about you? What information have you gathered that could lead to Kali?"

They hesitated but Dottie muttered, "Fair is fair and if they're going to be working with us..."

"Yeah, true enough," sighed Mick. She started flipping through some of their things, Billy grabbing a file and passing it over to her. "We've got a contact that Dottie's meeting tomorrow and we were also going to meet this politician here. If you want something dirty to happen under the radar in this area, he's the one to get it done."

It seemed that the time for outright yelling had taken a backseat as more information passed between the two groups. They actually talked, for the moment equals in their want to find Kali.

"If you're really staying to help, you'll need a place to sleep," Funshine eventually said.

At his words, Will let out a tired yawn and Lucas checked his watch. They were technically still at square one but they had a lot more information that they'd gathered in the past few hours.

Funshine gestured to Axel and Mick and the three stood up. “We’ll find a place for you to camp out,” Funshine said. “Ms. Jane, you’re welcome to take Ms. Kali’s room. I’m sure she wouldn’t mind.”

Jane nodded her thanks and as those three left, the kids stretched and yawned in varying degrees of fatigue. Max stood up, clasping her hands and reaching as far as she could go. The sudden flair of pain in her side reminded her of why that was such a bad idea though. The past few days she’d masked it pretty well but now that she’d forgotten the mark was even there, it seemed to hurt twice as bad. None of her friends seemed to notice which was good. She’d thought hiding it from them would be the hardest but as long as she kept herself cheerful enough, none of them seemed to notice—

“Show me!”

The calm was broken as Billy grabbed her and pulled her back and away from the group.

“Hey get off!”

“Billy, what the hell man?!”

“Let go of her!”

Everyone was yelling at once but before anyone could pull Billy off of her, he’d already grabbed the hem of her shirt and pulled it far enough up to see what he’d suspected. He froze, giving Max just enough time to shove him off and pull her shirt back down.

She looked around, at Dottie and her friends, all shocked and eyes wide.

“Max, what happened?” Lucas whispered.

“It’s nothing—”

“Do not say that! It’s not nothing. It’s not!” Billy yelled.

Max instinctively shouted back. “It was one time!”

“That’s what you’ll say! It was one time-one fucking time! And when

it happens again you'll keep saying that! You'll say it's only two times! You'll say it doesn't mean anything! It wasn't a fucking pattern and that it's no one's fault and it'll keep going and going until it being no one's fault becomes your fault and you wonder what the fuck is wrong with you! So do not tell me it's nothing!"

The silence was deafening. Max felt like she couldn't breathe as she looked up at him. She didn't know what to say, what to even feel. He'd never looked at her like that. No mask of hatred and anger or just pure rage.

His face was open. Open concern, open worry, open regret and Max didn't like it. She shoved him back harder, this time hitting his chest.

"Don't act like you care. You didn't then. And it's not like you have a reason to now," growled out Max. Just then, the others were back. They stared with varying degrees of confusion and concern, looking at how everyone was on their feet and muscles tense.

"Uh, we got a place cleared out for—" Mick tried but Max immediately interrupted her.

"Fine, where?"

"Maxine—"

"Don't fucking touch me!" Max yelled, backing away from Billy. "And don't call me that. Now where are we sleeping tonight?"

The moment the words were out of Mick's mouth, Max was practically running out of the room. Her friends froze up for a second before running after her. Jane hesitated, looking to Billy with large, understanding eyes before following them.

Billy fell in a chair. He'd left and his dad had discovered a new target. He'd left and now Max was suffering for it. He hadn't liked her or Susan or the fact that Susan wanted to fucking start somewhere new and away from Max's dad and so it had been easier to blame them for moving to fucking Hawkins and everything else than acknowledging that he'd been the real reason for their move. He'd never liked Max. Just a nuisance, another responsibility that could

get him in trouble with his dad.

He could remember the day he'd grabbed her. He hadn't meant to, and it had been the first and only time but he'd just been so angry and she'd just kept pushing him and—

That look in her eyes. That pure anger breaking through at being discovered, at someone feeling sympathy for her situation, Billy knew that look. He'd seen it in the mirror every day until he'd thought he'd explode.

It was his fault. Oh god it was his fucking fault!

As he thought that, Max found the room on her own. Some makeshift mattresses that were somewhat questionable had been pulled out along with two sleeping bags and a random assortment of sheets and things that could be used as pillows. She fell down, protectively wrapping her arms around herself.

Like Billy fucking cared! Christ, his acting must have improved or something. It didn't make any sense. He didn't care about anyone but himself. He didn't get it. It was just one time...

"Max!" Lucas quickly cried, the others close behind. "Max are you ok?"

"I don't want to talk about it," she growled out, looking down and away.

"You said you'd tell us if anything happened," whispered Will. "You said you'd talk to us."

"He was drunk and it was just one time!" Max yelled out.

At the same time, Billy screamed into his hands, standing up and kicking the chair out from under him.

"What the hell? You have a family fight or some shit?" asked Axel.

Billy's hands fell to his sides. He was already so fucking tired from this day and now to learn about this. "It's my fucking fault. If I had stayed—"

“What the hell happened?” interrupted Mick.

“Pop beat up the step-sibling,” Dottie sighed before snapping her bubblegum.

Mick let out a tired sigh. “Why are you surprised? From what little you told us, he’s a right shit—”

“It was my fault!” Billy yelled. “You don’t understand! If I’d been there—”

“You’d what?” shot back Axel. “Still be getting beat? You got out of there as soon as you could. Who’s going to blame you for that?”

“You don’t get it!” Billy cried again.

Funshine slowly moved forward, putting a hand on Billy’s shoulder and stilling him. “You are not your father. Neither did you make your father the man who he is. What you’ve done wouldn’t have changed his actions.”

“But you don’t get it! I don’t even like the brat. I don’t-she’s annoying as all hell but-but this isn’t-and Kali’s still missing and now we’re fucking playing babysitter and I just-I don’t-she—” His voice was shaking too much. If he kept going he’d cry for sure.

Tears were already falling from Max’s face.

Her friends were hugging her and despite how she’d tried to push them away and yell, they’d just kept holding tight.

“Hopper will help,” Jane firmly stated, the others softly agreeing.

Max had already half shouted half cried her way through talking about her mom. Her mom didn’t see and didn’t pay attention enough and they’d grown too far apart and she just couldn’t trust her anymore but the kids kept pushing. She could trust them. She could trust Hopper and Joyce. They’d help her when they got back and after they found Kali.

Avoiding them equaled protecting them. At least that’s what Max had thought and now she was just trying not to cry harder as they hugged

her tight and seemed content on not letting go. She'd known it was wrong-of course it damn well was-but she hadn't wanted her friends to worry, to fight with her mom. And it had just been one time but... Billy's words rang through her head.

"It doesn't fucking stop!" Billy yelled. "I thought-I thought I was-that he did what he did was because of me and-and I'm so-so damn happy." Now he was crying despite how hard he had tried to keep himself from doing so. Axel had a hand on one shoulder and Mick was doing a sort of half hug. "I thought it was me-I thought-it didn't matter what Kali said or anyone else or myself I just-I thought it was-it was me and-I shouldn't-he's fucking hitting her now-it's not right-I shouldn't be happy but-but it wasn't me-I'm not wrong-it's-it's not my fault. It's not!"

Billy could feel himself just completely breaking down, even more so than earlier and this time in front of everyone, not just Funshine. But they didn't reprimand him. They didn't put him in his place because it wasn't wrong to cry. He could just fucking let it out and no one would hit him.

"I'm sorry," cried Max. "I'm so-so sorry—"

"Stop saying that Max," whispered Lucas.

"You've got nothing to be sorry for," Dustin replied, for once not cracking a joke. They moved a little, getting more comfortable and grabbing blankets to fight against the cold. They managed to all remain in some form of pile, holding on tight and Max's tears finally drying up.

Axel pulled Billy closer and slung an arm around his shoulders. Billy instinctively curled in, hiding his face from the others as his breath continued to shudder.

"Come on Curly. It's been a long fucking night," sighed Axel as he dragged him off and away.

Billy just held on as tightly as he could.

Joyce and Hopper stood in Nancy's destroyed room, looking at the box and its contents. Joyce looked up with wide eyes, clearly asking Jim if he'd known about the gun, and he shook his head in response. Not that he could blame her for wanting one after the Upside Down, and it was in her legal rights to do so, but the images in the box only raised more questions. The photos were poorly taken, some barely recognizable as people. The clearer images didn't ring any bells for Jim but from the angles, it appeared that Nancy had been spying on them.

The other papers were a timeline spanning the past four months. One quick look finally had the pieces falling into place. Joyce's eyes only widened and Jim quickly made the motion to leave.

Hefting the box under one arm, they put the board back up in place. Though Jim was betting that Nancy had been taken, he still took the time to write on a quick post-it note the words 'call Steve'. It was small and meaningless and if the people who had done this came back, they probably wouldn't notice it or even understand the meaning. If Nancy was still free though, she'd understand what needed to be done and hopefully Steve would be able to get her in contact with them if she called. They then turned off the lights and closed the door after making sure the hallway was clear. They didn't speak until they were back in Jim's truck, Joyce quickly taking the box and pulling out the papers again.

"She was on to something Hop. Was it them? Was it!"

"I don't recognize any of the faces," Jim sighed, flipping back through the photos. "God damn it! I wish there was more information here."

"Whatever it is, it can't be far. Do you think the kids..."

"If Jane knew about this, she would have told me," stressed Jim. "She would have. It's just coincidence."

"But what if they found her? What about the kids? Whether they intended it or not, this could have gotten a lot more complicated than just wanting to find her sister."

Jim didn't respond right away. He started looking through the notes and pictures again, hoping for something that might stick out. A name did catch his attention. He stared at it long and hard until Joyce took it away and said, "Didn't we see his name on a billboard?"

"Yeah...yeah I think we did. He's up for election soon or something like that," muttered Jim. "According to this, Nancy was trying to set up a meeting with him. He wouldn't take. Maybe we can talk to him tomorrow."

"It's worth a try. And a better lead than anything else we have," sighed Joyce.

Jim started up his truck and they drove until he spotted a crap hotel. Once they'd gotten a room and Joyce was well into going through the notes with a fine toothed comb, Jim took the time to call Steve. Joyce was still debating on calling Jonathan. He had a right to know what was going on but Joyce knew he'd drop everything to come and help. She was stuck between telling him what he deserved to hear and simply trying to keep him safe as any mother would.

As she went back and forth on her decision, Jim used the phone in their room to call up Steve. He answered right away despite how late it was.

"Powell, I swear to God just give me five minutes of—"

"It's Hopper kid."

"Chief!" There was some sound of movement from the other end as Steve probably sat up, his voice far more aware and awake. "Any news?"

"None of the good kind," sighed Jim. He quickly went into detail about what they'd found only for Steve to suddenly hit something. Jim paused as he heard Steve let out a loud curse.

"I knew something was off!"

"What was off?"

"I called Nancy not to long ago just to see what was happening on

her end and if she had listened to your message. I wasn't sure when you guys would get to Chicago and I just wanted to keep in the loop. She picked up but it just...it got weird fast. Like she went silent for a long time and then just said she had homework to get to and she wasn't making since. I had half a mind to just go down myself but I figured it would be better to wait for your call."

"I'm glad you did." Jim rubbed his eyes tiredly. "I had hoped she was still free but...at least we're sure she was taken now."

"What do you want me to do?"

"Give me a second to think." Jim sighed, walking back and forth with the cord bouncing around him. Joyce murmured that she was going to go downstairs and see if they had a map. Jim nodded and continued his pacing, finally muttering, "From what I can tell, all the shit is going down here. Go back to the Lab, just make sure no one's been poking around there and then get your ass up here."

"Right away Chief. Where are you staying?"

Jim gave him the address and the hotel's number, saying goodbye and putting the phone down as Joyce came back up with a map in hand.

Setting it out on one of the beds, she pointed to a bit she'd circled. "I've got directions for city hall. I think our best bet is to call and make sure the man's in his office and then just march down there. If we surprise him, they're less likely to be able to stop us right away."

"Are you suggesting we kidnap the mayor of this city?" snorted Jim.

"Hopper, if tying this man to a pole and hanging him over the side of a building would get the kids back, I would do it," Joyce answered, her tone completely serious and leaving no room for argument.

"Fair enough, but maybe we shouldn't start with it," sighed Jim. "First we just need to know if he knows anything useful. Believe me, I wish we could just track him down tonight but better to wait it out." He ran a hand through his hair with another tired sigh. "I told Steve to come over. The more fire power, the better and everything seems

to be centered on this city. Have you decided to tell Jonathan yet?"

"No...I think I'll do it in the morning when I have a clearer head. I just...one son is possibly in danger. I don't want to do the same to the other."

Jim nodded in understanding. "And that undeveloped film, perhaps it holds a clue to what's going on as well. After all, it had to be put into the box for a reason."

Joyce nodded in agreement. We can get that done before march down on the mayor's office."

"Well at least we have a battle plan now. I'm going to go grab something to eat. Want anything?"

"Cigarettes."

"Ditto that," sighed Jim as he grabbed his wallet and left. It was going to be a long, long night.

Getting out of work early, Nancy hurried home with a new found sense of purpose and grabbed all her tools. She got her camera and notepad and mapped out the roads she was going to have to take, there being no official address for the building yet considering that it was in the middle of nowhere. She thought about taking her gun but decided against it. The plan was to take a few pictures and stay at a distance after all, not to get her hands dirty.

As she grabbed her coat, the phone began to ring but she ignored it and rushed to her car instead. They could leave a message.

Thanks to the amount of traffic that Fridays brought with them, it was almost six thirty by the time she got out of the city. Five more minutes on the highway and Nancy exited onto a county road, the houses becoming less common and the scenery darkening as she avoided the major cities and towns around Chicago. What little light the moon gave diminished as clouds passed over it and Nancy nearly missed her next turn.

The radio station that she always listened to started to fizzle out and

she eventually turned it off, opting for the silence around her.

She passed several more abandoned structures that had been left to rot before spotting lights in the distance. It was more out in the open than Nancy had expected. She took a gamble as she turned down a newly paved drive and down into a small parking lot. It rested in front of what resembled a factory, several lights still on and shining through the darkness.

It looked how the revised plans said it should. Doubt entered her mind as she wondered if it had been a goose chase but she forced herself out of the car and to the door all the same. She already had a planned story in mind should she meet anyone.

Going up to the front doors, she quickly spotted a guard inside, an interesting fact considering Nancy's car was the only one in the parking lot. Her own doubt started to disappear. The thought of this being a front returned and Nancy brazenly knocked on the glass door, carefully watching the guard's reactions.

Logically, her knocking on a building in the middle of nowhere would give anyone a fright. What was surprising though was the gun on his hip rather than a taser and the fact that his hand remained there even as he approached. Considering most people's first impressions of her, this was definitely the most extreme.

As he drew closer, she noted that she couldn't hear movement on the other side and instead of just talking through the glass, he opened the door. The doors were thicker than she'd realized. Sound proof and perhaps bullet proof as well? Now why would that be necessary?

"What do you want?"

"I'm sorry. I'm just headed to Iowa City and I've gotten a bit lost," Nancy replied, putting on a ditzy voice and flashing large, worried eyes. "There's practically no one out here and I was hoping—"

"Take a right out of here, turn left on Leeman Way, and you'll hit the highway. Good night."

The man tried to close the door and Nancy instinctively stuck her

foot in the way. She pretended not to notice the way his grip on his gun tightened and simply said, “You said a right from here, a right on —”

“Left on Leeman Way. Good night.”

This time Nancy let the door close. It took all her energy not to book it back to the car. That man had looked ready to shoot her. No way in hell the building was for the bullshit company that the blueprints claimed it to be.

Once in the car, Nancy did take a right out of the parking lot but instead of following the guard’s directions or turning around, she drove round the area. Carefully taking notes on the map and remembering what signs she passed, she went round and round looking for...something. Anything really.

However, despite the unwarranted hostility from guard, Nancy still didn’t have any proof, at least not until she came to a screeching halt in front of a hidden drive. Pulling off to the side, she got out and looked at the freshly turned earth, the broken branches. Despite being overgrown, the path had been used recently and frequently.

There was of course a chance that this road belonged to some old farm house but the fact that Nancy hadn’t seen any other livable properties in the area kept her suspicious. She got back into the car and pulled it farther to the side before grabbing her camera and heading into the trees. She walked for a long time with nothing but the whistling wind and the occasional bug making noise. The temperature had dropped seemingly twice as low and the ever increasing layer of clouds suggested freezing rain or perhaps even snow.

She pulled her coat tighter around her, the minutes ticking by until light started to filter through the leaves again. Moving off the actual road and more into the foliage, she continued her advance. The trees thinned a bit and she pulled up the camera, staring at the lights that shined back. A large, bunker type structure sat there, armed military looking personnel standing around it and the doors firmly shut.

The chances of there being actual patrols increased. Considering what

the men were carrying and the look of the bunker, there was definitely more security. Nancy took her pictures as quickly as she could, having to redo some because of how much she was shaking.

Adrenaline coursed through her veins as she started to head back. What if she ran into a patrol? What if there were wires, trips, even mines covering the area?

The trek back seemed to take years off of her life. She was careful of every step, constantly focusing on the noises around her. The fact that her car was still there gave her some small comfort as she quickly got in and headed back towards Chicago. She still didn't have any idea as to what they were doing out there but she had something to hold onto. Perhaps if she could try to talk to that politician again... She'd been ignored at every turn but perhaps she just hadn't found the right way in.

It was late by the time she got back and snow had started to fall. She hurried up to her apartment and went straight to her closet where she put the roll of film in the box. She'd develop it tomorrow morning. Carefully closing the closet again, she headed into her living room just as the phone rang. This time she answered and was immediately met with Steve practically yelling in her ear.

"Oh thank Christ you answered! Alright, so have you listened to Hopper's message? Are they there yet?"

It took Nancy a moment to recognize Steve's voice. "What? No I just got home. Steve, what's going on?"

"Ok, I was hoping Hopper and Joyce would already be there but I'll just give you the heads up instead," Steve sighed.

He started talking again, about all the kids going missing, apparently Jane had a sister, all of them coming to Chicago, but Nancy wasn't really listening. Not anymore. She'd heard the door open behind her, her heart hammering as she wished she'd brought her gun out. Slowly turning around, Nancy watched a man approach her, gesturing with a gun for her to put the phone down.

"Steve," Nancy slowly said and interrupting his monologue, "it's

getting pretty late. I've got homework. I'm going to have to let you go.”

“Wait-Nancy didn't you hear me—”

“I've got to go. Homework you know? Sorry,” whispered Nancy, ending the phone call and focusing back on the gun. Before she could even say anything, the man grabbed her and shoved her to the table. The wind was knocked out of her, a slight wheeze escaping her lips. Her eyes strained to look around, watching as men in utility uniforms came in. She forced herself to simultaneously look everywhere and nowhere.

She wanted to immediately look to her bedroom, to beg that they didn't find that box if only to leave something behind for someone to find. However, if she focused too much, they could notice and turn all focus there. The same could happen if her eyes avoided the area so she just continuously looked around as her apartment was torn apart.

What to do? She hadn't tried to say anything to Steve because of the look in the man's eyes. They weren't bringing her in as a necessity. They were doing this because it was less messy than blowing her brains out. But that didn't mean he wouldn't have pulled the trigger the moment she tried to warn Steve.

“When you said we had a creep sneaking around, I figured it would be some fifty year old who still lives in his mom's basement,” snorted a man. He came near, his fingers tracing her cheek.

Nancy acted quickly, biting down on the digits as hard as she could.

The man didn't have time to scream, another one covering his mouth and yanking him away. Copper filled Nancy's mouth before she spit onto the floor. Someone else immediately came to clean it up as Nancy was forcefully pulled upwards.

“Do something like that again and tomorrow's paper will have you as the headline.”

Nancy didn't argue as she watched men take down her photos and

tore through her couch.

"The hallway still clear?"

Someone nodded.

Nancy quickly found herself trying not to trip over her own feet as she was forced into the hall, hands behind her back. They moved quickly to the alley behind the building. One person put a sack over her head and another shoved her into the back of a van. If they were going back to the same place, then the sack was pretty pointless. But if they were going somewhere else...how large were they? It was entirely possible she'd only found an outer ripple and not the rock that had caused it to begin with.

They'd probably threaten her once they found out who she was. Use her family against her, maybe even Hawkins as a whole. Basically every threat imaginable could occur...or they'd just lock her up. Throw her into some prison with a different name and make it like she never existed, perhaps even fake her death like Will—

No, she was over thinking this. Perhaps things would get that bad but there was no point in thinking like that beforehand.

She remained still. Fighting wouldn't do her any good and all she could do was listen to the people moving around her. Eventually the van door fully closed. The engine roared to life. Right away, it was impossible to track where they were going, even if they were headed to the same place. The constant movement being her only real sense made Nancy's stomach turn, a few times nearly throwing up in the ever heating darkness. She'd never considered herself to be claustrophobic but now it was getting hard to breath.

What next? She couldn't get to far ahead. That would only freak her out more. But she needed a way out, something that she could hold over them if necessary. Her mind went back to Murray and all his sayings and bits of advice. What was the best way to survive?

The van continually stopped and started at presumably crossings and lights. There was only one moment when the doors finally opened though and Nancy was dragged outside. Whether they were back at

the bunker or the fake factory or those two were connected or somewhere else, Nancy couldn't be sure. She just knew they were inside something by the sounds of everyone's shoes echoing against hard concrete.

More twists and turns came forward, then a downwards movement like an elevator. Still darkness remained, Nancy's breath becoming more labored as the temperature only seemed to rise. Left. Right. Right. Left again. Down. Where the hell were they?

The sound of a door opening finally broke through the mold. The footsteps didn't sound as loud now, like they'd moved from a hall to a room perhaps?

She felt herself being forced into a chair. Cold metal chained her to it before suddenly her eyes were blinded. The footsteps began to recede and by the time Nancy's vision cleared, the door was closed again. She couldn't help but flash back to her time in the Lab, when her and Jonathan had first tried to get somewhere only for Dr. Owens to threaten them in the nicest possible way.

God Jonathan, she was so damn thankful she hadn't brought him in on this sooner. He would have just been stuck right there next to her. But with no one knowing...Steve had to have picked up something was wrong and—

Wait. He'd mentioned the kids. Mike and everyone else missing! She'd completely forgotten about that the moment the gun had been shoved in her face. And they were missing in Chicago and Hopper—there was a chance! Relief flooded through her, almost as addictive as adrenaline as she let out a grateful sigh.

Coincidence or not, the Chief was supposed to be going to her apartment and soon he and Joyce would figure out what the hell was going on. With that in mind, she steeled herself for whatever happened next. The threats, some form of torture, she just had to last until an opportunity presented itself or Hopper came.

She looked around at the white walls. There wasn't even a window in this room though a small camera did occupy one of the corners. The table, a spare chair, and that was it. She couldn't even stretch despite

how she pushed and ached against the cuffs.

At first that's all she had. She waited for someone to come in but no one did. Time moved at a snail's pace. There was no clock to watch it pass. All Nancy could do was mark how long it had been by how tired she became. She'd pulled a few all-nighters in high school and now college, enough that she could tell when her twenty-four hours of wakefulness was approaching.

Still no one came and Nancy felt herself drifting off to sleep despite her better judgment. She slumped forward, her eyes falling shut before she was suddenly jolting upright again. Her back ached and she strained against the cuffs to try and wipe the sleep from her eyes.

Judging by her present headache and the fatigue that still rested behind her eyes, it couldn't have been long. It was likely still the early morning, maybe close to seven or even eight. She shifted uncomfortably before finally choosing to call out to her captors.

"At least a bathroom!? Is that too much to ask?"

No response. The door didn't open and still all Nancy could do was sit and cross her legs a little tighter. She decided to go for the more pitiful route. Even if it hadn't worked before, it didn't mean it wouldn't now.

She tried all the tricks, the big eyes and the pouting lips and the near tearful looks. She was the girl way in over her head and didn't want anything to do with this and would do anything to leave.

But that didn't work either. Nancy started to yell again, her irritation rising and rising before the door finally opened.

"Please, can I just go to the bathroom?! Please that's...that's..." she trailed off, her eyes drawn to the cane as it clicked against the ground and the man came in. "Dr. Owens?"

"I'm sorry for not coming sooner," Dr. Owens said as he came around the table and sat down. Nancy forced herself to close her mouth as she silently stared at him. "I practically had to drag the information out of them. When I heard that some young woman had been found

snooping around, well I couldn't help but wonder if it was you. Or perhaps even Joyce! You lot certainly don't seem far behind when it comes to things of this matter," he finished with a tired chuckle.

Nancy just continued to stare. This was Dr. Owens, a man that Nancy had never held in high regard but he'd helped Will. He'd helped Mike and tried to save Bob. He'd given El a new identity despite how difficult that had to have been. Nancy wanted to just be angry, to throw what little respect she'd gathered for the man out the window. However, she chose to sit and watch instead. Dr. Owens had always been fairly chatty. Perhaps he'd give something away.

"They wanted to just keep you here for ages, utterly unacceptable for a young woman. And then of course the man who was going to interrogate you? A real piece of work, let me tell you. I convinced them you'd be more willing to talk to a familiar face though," Dr. Owens finished.

Nancy slowly blinked, again trying to understand. There was something beneath the surface. She just needed to reach out and pull it from the dark.

"Now Nancy- I suppose it is alright to call you Nancy, isn't it? We've been through a lot together and I'd like to think you trust me," Dr. Owens continued. "There's really only two ways that this will go and you cooperating will help."

Nancy's eyes flicked to a bead of sweat that dripped down his forehead. It wasn't particularly hot in here. She doubted Dr. Owens had come here running considering he was still sporting the cane, and he didn't look fatigued like he'd just done something physical.

Anxiety? Nervousness? Fear? Why? For her? That didn't make since.

Nancy finally broke through Dr. Owens' little speeches. "What are you afraid of Dr. Owens?"

The silence that followed was deafening.